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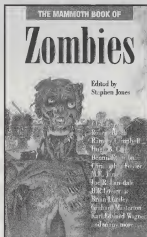
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A message from the Guest Editor

For those of you who hadn't noticed, this issue of *Interzone* looks rather different from usual. The simple explanation is that this is an issue of Nexus masquerading as an issue of *Interzone*. The more complex explanation is that David Pringle wanted to modernize the appearance of *Interzone*, and I was the person he chose to do the job. I already had a magazine of my own, *SF Nexus*, but was having difficulties producing my fourth issue. The obvious solution was to merge the two magazines, produce *Nexus 4* as issue 88 of *Interzone*, and then fold *Nexus* so I could concentrate on improving *Interzone* – which is what we are doing.

The remaining *Nexus* subs are being serviced with copies of *Interzone*, and *Nexus* subscribers are being exhorted to re-subscribe to *Interzone*, where they will find the best qualities of both magazines combined.

One area of continuing discussion is the future character of the magazine. Obviously, I would like to continue to have some editorial role, where David would be happy for me to abandon editorial work and concentrate on the graphic design. *Nexus* subscribers will recognize this issue as more – much more – of the same, while *Interzone* subscribers will see that while the standard of writing is as high, there are important differences between this issue and the usual *Interzone* contents. We have agreed to be governed by the readers in deciding what the future contents of the magazine should be. If the consensus is that they would rather have the distinctive *Nexus* flavour added to *Interzone*, then I will take a positive editorial role in addition to my graphic design duties, and you will see either an occasional *Nexus* edition of *Interzone*, or a regular monthly *Nexus* department within the usual *Interzone* mix. If, on the other hand, reader reaction is largely negative towards the contents of this issue, then I will be content to take a back seat and concentrate on the graphic design. I have to say that either way I would be happy – there is nothing worse than doing a lot of work which is not appreciated, but equally, nothing better than the same work being appreciated.

Thus it is vitally important for me, for David, and for you that you tell us what you think of this issue. There will always be moaning minnies who resist change; none of us want them to govern the changes *Interzone* is going through – and they are always the first to write. If you approve of what we are doing, or only some of it, now is your chance to say so. Help decide the future of your favourite *SF* magazine, write to us now!

Science Fiction has always been impossible to define – except subjectively, in which case John W. Campbell's dictum that "science fiction is what the editors of *SF* magazines buy" is probably the most useful and certainly the most pertinent. Colin Greenland points out in this issue that space opera is the ultimate myth of the industrial age, for me, the manifest truth of this points to the reason for *SF*'s indefinability, that science fiction is not about science at all.

I have always enjoyed – and continue to enjoy – the *SF* that has appeared in *Analog*, and *Asounding* before it. But, to me, the term "science fiction" was never precise enough to accurately describe the fiction I enjoyed reading, and evidently this was true for others too, which perhaps is why the term "hard *SF*" was coined for it. On the one

to get us there in under an hour. The Concord technology is 25 years old now, but there is no sign of those passenger rockets. Nevertheless, we live in the future of the bright-eyed youngster I was, and, frankly, it doesn't come up to scratch.

When I was young, there was no famine in the world, and the only meaningful war had been fought and won before I was born. Now there are famines and civil wars everywhere. What went wrong?

Quite simply, I had my eyes opened. These things didn't exist because we didn't have a television, and such things were never reported in my hearing. Now, they're on one tv channel or another almost everyday. What happened?

The Information Revolution happened! The Industrial Revolution is over. We live in

DISAPPOINTING FUTURES

hand, it was easy to use this as a term of abuse, for fiction which featured cardboard characters and obvious plots, while on the other hand it was easy to claim that proper characterization would get in the way of the "science" in a story.

The problem here is that the "science" in any given story is almost never science, but rather technology or engineering. Indeed, long before I encountered other *SF* fans I would characterize to myself the kind of fiction that I liked as "engineering fiction". Nowadays I would probably prefer the term "gadget fiction" – whether the gadget was a time machine, a mile-long space-ship, a ray gun/blaster or a holo-deck. Real engineering fiction – the sort I really enjoy – takes current technology into places we can't go yet, and generates problems and solutions using known or nearly known facts. To me, science is finding out facts, where technology and engineering is putting those facts to use in the real universe. And science fiction – engineering fiction – is about what new uses could be found for existing technology, and what engineering uses could be found for the new scientific discoveries we might make in the future.

Indeed, another way of characterizing *SF* is as "fiction about the future" (which takes no account at all of the fascinating area of alternative and parallel universes), which is really only another way of saying engineering fiction, taking us a little way into the future with the "if this goes on..." scenario – "extrapolation", as Heinlein has termed it. But extrapolation is, almost by definition, straightline, and the one thing that nature, the universe and mankind will never ever do is follow a straight line into the future.

Science fiction as we have known it in the past is fiction about humanity using its ingenuity to construct gadgets intended to improve the lot of humanity in the future. When I was a kid aeroplanes had propellers and took half a day to fly across the Atlantic. In my future, Concord would do the trip in three hours, then we would develop rockets

a post-industrial society, the Information Revolution is here – and we are in danger of missing the boat again. The industrial revolution gave us many varied gadgets and promised to improve the quality of our lives. Perhaps it did, but while we played with the new toys, we never really grasped the ends that other of the new gadgets were being put to until finally still other gadgets showed us people starving or being shot in other countries.

The information revolution: an optical cable in our house allows me to receive 43 tv channels, while the technology is being developed to make that 4,000 channels. We are in danger of being swamped with information. Some people will react in luddite fashion and resist the info flow. Others will seek escape from it in virtual worlds or drugs (or both – see the interview with Jeff Noon). But finally we don't need more information any more than we need more gadgets. What we needed, what we need, is the wisdom to use the gadgets and the information we already have to better ends.

And this is where *SF* can help. I don't propose we redefine *SF* – *SF* is what I, an *SF* editor, buy, remember. What I suggest is that we think carefully about what *SF* is for. Fiction can help us be better people, and science fiction can help those of us with an interest in whatever the "science" in the title is taken to refer to by the reader. We missed the industrial revolution because we were dazzled by the baubles, and the people who were interested in the getting of wisdom from fiction eschewed the gadgets altogether, so creating internal wrangling rather than new wisdom.

With the information revolution we're getting another chance. We have the technology, we have the knowledge, and we have the skills. Let's use science fiction to digest the information revolution; let's help people cope with the data flow; and perhaps science fiction will rise to its proper place of pre-eminence in the literary world.

Paul Brazier



Dead Space

for
the

Geoff Ryman

UNEXPECTED



Jonathan was going to have to fire Simon. It was a big moment in Jonathan's day, a solid achievement from the point of view of the company. Jonathan knew that his handling of the whole procedure had been model – so far. He had warned Simon a month ago that termination was a possibility and that plans should be made. Jonathan knew that he had felt all the appropriate feelings – sympathy, regret, and an echoing in himself of the sick, sad panic of redundancy.

Well, if you have sincere emotion, hang onto it. Use it. Hell, there had even been a sting of tears around the bottom of his eyes as he told Simon. Jonathan's score for that session had been 9.839 out of 10, a personal best for a counselling episode.

Now he had to be even better. The entire Team's average had nose-dived. So had Jonathan's own scores. He, the Team, needed a good score. Next month's printouts were at stake.

So Jonathan waited in the meeting room with a sign up on the door that said IN USE. On his eyes were contact lenses that were marked for accurate measurement, and which flickered and swerved as his eyes moved. There was a bright pattern of strips and squares and circles on his shirt, to highlight breathing patterns. Galvanic skin resistance was monitored



5

by his watch strap. It was, of course, a voluntary program, designed to give managers and staff alike feedback on their performance.

There was a knock on the door and Simon came in, handsome, neat, running a bit to fat, 52 years old.

It would be the benches for Simon, the park benches in summer with the civic chess board with the missing pieces. Then the leaves and seasonal chill in autumn. Winter would be the packed and steamy public library with the unwashed bodies, and waiting for a change to read the job ads, check the terminals, scan the benefits information. It would be bye bye to clean shirts, ties without food stains, a desk, the odd bottle of wine, pride. For just a moment, Jonathan saw it all clearly in his mind.

Either you were a performer or you weren't.

"Hi, Simon, have a good weekend?"

"Yes, thank you," said Simon, as he sat down, his face impassive, his movements contained and neat.

Jonathan sighed. "I wanted to give you this now, before I sent it to anyone else. I wanted you to be the first to know. I'm very sorry."

Jonathan held out a sealed, white, blank envelope. Simon, primed for a month, simply nodded.

"I hope you know there's nothing personal in this. I've tried to explain why it's necessary, but just to be clear, there has been a severe drop in our performance and we simply must up our averages, and be seen to be taking some positive action. In terms of more staff training, that sort of thing."

Already this was not going well. The opening line about the weekend could not be less appropriate, and nobody was going to think that being fired was a positive step or care two hoots about the training other people were going to receive. Inwardly, Jonathan winced. "Anyway," he shrugged with regret, still holding out the envelope that Simon had not taken. Jonathan tossed it across the table and it spun on a cushion of air across the wood-patterned surface.

Simon made no move to pick it up. "We all get old," he said. "You will, too."

"And when my scores slip," said Jonathan, trying to generate some fellow feeling. "I expect the same thing will happen to me."

"I hope so," said Simon.

Right, counselling mode. Jonathan remembered his training. Unfortunately, so did Simon – they had been on the same courses.

"Are you angry, would you like to talk?" said Jonathan, remembering: keep steady eye contact, or rather contact with the forehead or bridge of the nose, which is less threatening. Lean backwards so less aggression, but echo body language.

Simon smiled slightly and started to pick his nose, very messily, and look at the result. He held the result up towards Jonathan – echo this body language.

Jonathan nodded as if in agreement. "It's only natural that you should feel some resentment, but it might be more constructive if you expressed it verbally. You know, say what you feel, blow off some steam. If not to me, then to someone, the Welfare Officer perhaps."

"I don't need to blow off steam," said Simon and stood up and walked to the door.

Procedures were not being followed; discipline was important.

"Simon, you haven't taken your letter."

Simon stood at the door for a moment. "It's not my letter. It's not written for me, it's addressed to Personnel so they can stop paying me."

Boy, thought Jonathan, if you were still being marked, you'd be in trouble, buddy.

"You forget," said Simon, his blue eyes gray and flinty. "I used to work in Accounts." He picked up the letter, paused, and wiped his finger on it. Then he left the room.

Jonathan sat at the table, trembling with rage. Fuck counselling, he wanted to haul off and slug the guy. He took a deep breath, just like in the handling stress course, then stood up and left the meeting room, remembering to change the sign on the door. VACANT it said.

Back in his own office, he checked his score. It was bad form to check your scores too often; it showed insecurity, but Jonathan couldn't help himself. He verbalised to the computer. "Performance feedback, Dayplan Item One."

His mark was higher than he had thought it would be: 7.2, well over a five and edging towards a 7.5 for a pretty tough situation. But it was not the high score the Team needed.

It was 8.42. Three minutes ahead of schedule.

"Dayplan complete," he verbalised, and his day was laid out before him on the screen.

table
8:30	Simon Hasley (actioned)
8:45	Dayplan confirmed and in tray
8:50	Sally meeting prep
9:00	Sally meeting
9:30	Sales meeting William
10:00	Dead space for the unexpected..

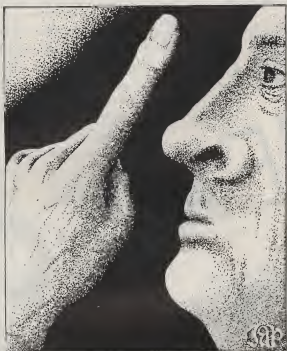
It was important that work was seen to be prioritised, that nothing stayed on the desk, or queued up on the machine. It all had to be

handled in the right order. The computer worked that out for you from the priority rating you gave each item, gave you optimum work times and the corporate cost, and if you did not object, those were your targets for the first half of the day.

Right. In-tray. There was a management report on purchasing. Jonathan did not purchase, but he needed to know the new procedures his Finance Officer was supposed to follow. So make that a priority eight, book in a reading for it next week, and ask for the machine to prepare a precis. Next was a memo with spreadsheet from Admin. Admin acted as a kind of prophylactic against Accounts, giving early warning of what would strike Accounts as below par performance. Jonathan's heart sank. Late invoices. Holy shit, not again, an average of 12 days?

Thanks a lot, George, thanks a fucking lot. Shit, piss, fuck, I'll cut off that god-damned asshole's head and stick it up his own greased asshole.

Ho-boy, Jonathan, that's anger. Channel it, use it. Right, we got ourselves a priority one here, schedule it in Dead



Space. Jonathan slammed his way into George's network terminal. Which at 8:47 in the morning was not switched on.

PRIORITY 1

George, we have a serious issue to discuss. Can you come to my office at 10:00 am today, Thursday 17th. Please come with figures on speed of invoicing.

J Rosson, III 723, nc 11723JR.

There goes our cash flow down the fucking tube. And interest payments to the Centre. Great.

There was a fretful knocking at his door. Jonathan could guess who it was. Two minutes was all the time he had. In came Harriet, gray hair flying. What you might call an individual. Jonathan swivelled, knowing his body language showed no surprise or alarm. His greeting was warm, friendly, in control. So far, so good.

"Hello, Harriet, good to see you, but I'm afraid I'm up against it this morning. I expect you've heard about Simon."

"Yes, I have actually," said Harriet, eyes bright, smile wide. She was preparing to sit down.

No, my door is not always open. Don't mess with my time management, lady. "I'd love to talk to you about it when I can give you some time. How about 10:10 this morning?"

"This will only take a minute." Harriet was still smiling. A tough old bird.

"I doubt that very much. It's an important issue, and I'd like to talk to you about it properly." With a flourish, he keyed her into his Dayplan. "There we go. 10:10. See you then?"

Harriet accepted defeat with good grace. "Lovely," she said. "I'll look forward to that." She even gave him a sweet little wave as she left.

Poor old cow is scared, thought Jonathan. Well, there are plans to get rid of her, so that should be a fairly easy session.

Next. Up came a report on a new initiative in timekeeping, a hobby horse of Jonathan's. Was a priority one justified just because he was interested in it? He decided to downgrade it, show he was keeping a sense of proportion, that he was a team player. He gave it a two and booked it in for Friday.

He was behind schedule. Thanks, Harriet. Next was a note of praise for a job well done from that crawler Jason. The guy even writes memos to apologise for not writing memos. Jonathan wastebinned it with a grin. Next was a welfare report on the Team's resident schizophrenic. Jonathan was sure the poor guy had been hired just to give them a bit of an obstacle to show jump. The Welfare Officer was asking him to counsel the man to reduce his smoking in

the office. But. He was to remember that the stress of giving up smoking could trigger another schizophrenic episode.

Oh come on, this really must be a monitoring exercise. Jonathan thought a moment. He should therefore show that he knew it was an exercise and not take it too seriously. So, he delegated. He dumped the whole report off his own screen and into the Dayplan of his Supporting Officer.

And so, 8:55. Five minutes to prep for Sally. Jeez, thought Jonathan. I hope I'm not showing. Not showing fear. Which meant, of course, that he was.

Simply, Sally was one of the big boys. She was the same grade as Jonathan, a 1.1 on a level D, but she was younger, whiplash quick, utterly charming, and she always won. Jonathan knew her scores were infinitely better than his own.

Sally had been naughty. Her Division and his Team had to co-operate on projects that were both above and below the line. Without telling him, she had called a meeting of his own grade 2s, flattered them no end, and then got the poor lambs to agree, just as a point of procedure, that all joint projects would be registered with her Division. This would cost his Team about three hundred thousand a year in turnover.

Jonathan had countered with a report on procedures, reminding all concerned that such decisions needed to be made at Divisional level, and suggesting a more thorough procedural review. Sally had countered with enthusiastic agreement, deadily, but said a joint presentation on procedures might eliminate misunderstanding. The

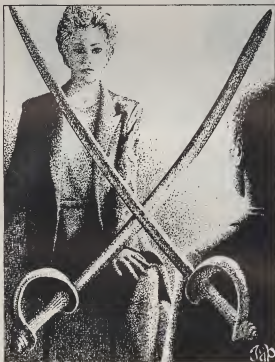
difference between discussion and presentation was the difference between procedures up for grabs, and procedures already set and agreed.

When Jonathan pointed this out at a Divisional Liaison, Sally had said "Awww!" as if he were a hurt, suspicious child. She had even started to counsel him – in front of management! Jonathan had never felt so angry, so outmanoeuvred. Now his Team had noticed pieces of artwork they should have controlled going elsewhere and wanted him to do something about it. Too late, guys. Bloody Harry, his boss, was too dim to see what had happened, or too feeble to fight. Harry had agreed to the presentation.

So, he told himself. The posture has to be teamwork, co-operation between different parts of the same organization, steer like hell to get back what he could. And keep smiling.

He put his phone and mail through to Support and went downstairs.

Sally's office was neater than his own, and had tiny white



furniture. It was like sitting on porcelain tea cups. He was sure she chose the furniture deliberately, to make large men feel clumsy. Sally offered him coffee. Christ, what was his caffeine count already? Too many stimulants, you lost points. Was she trying to jangle him, get him shaky?

"Oh, great, thanks," he said. "White with one sugar."

"Help yourself," she said. Her smile was warm and friendly. What she meant was: help yourself. I'm not your mother.

"Real cream," acknowledged Jonathan as he poured.

"Nothing but the best is good enough for us," said Sally. She was luxuriantly made up, frosted with sheen. She sat down opposite him. Her hair was in different streaks of honey, beige and blonde, and she was slim under her sharp and padded suit. Her entire mien was sociable and open, inviting trust.

"Thanks for the report," she said. "It was very useful, and I really want to thank you for organizing the presentation for us."

Jonathan had fought it every step of the way. "My pleasure," he said. "We really need to get the two teams together to talk. I just want to be clear that what we're aiming to do is work towards a set of procedures for shared work, which keeps everything going to the right people."

Sally nodded. But she didn't speak.

Jonathan double-checked. "Am I right?"

Her smile broadened just a stretch. "Uh-huh. We do have a set of procedures that your own staff agreed."

"Not all my staff, and not the Quality Action Units who should have been involved. The idea is to empower everyone in the organization."

"Well, I'm sure we can iron out any points of difference. Refer them to the Ouasi. OK?"

Jonathan played back the same trick, an uncommitted shrug. But it was one up to him.

A peace offering? Sally kept on. "I also thought that we should present to you first. Most of my staff are familiar with what you do, but our CD ROM work is new, and we need to go over it with your team."

Can I let her get away with that? The clock was ticking, his heart was racing. Caffeine and three hundred thousand smackers. Basically, her staff would NOT be there, say just three of them. They would have the floor and the agenda, but his people would outnumber them, and it would be very easy to take pot shots from the audience. On balance, yes, he could go along with that.

So he agreed. They set dates and agreed how to split the cost of wine and food. Sally gave him a warm and enveloping smile as he left.

Climbing back up the stairs, he reckoned he had scored a five. She still had the initiative, she'd gone no distance towards giving up registration of his jobs, but then, it could be argued that Harry had given them away. I got some points across, but anyone could see I was tense. Jeez. Why do I do it to myself?

Right, now it was Billy, then Dead Space, then the brief on the Commission tender, then lunch.

Lunch with Harry, his boss. Harry was shy and hated schmoozing, which was endearing in a boss, if only he didn't wring his hands for hours at a time and utterly fail to make

decisions. Jonathan braced himself for an hour of whining. Jonathan used to work out at lunchtime, till he realized that he scored a full .03 higher if he social-grazed instead. He was climbing the stairs now, to keep fit, though he was not too sure if anyone was noticing. For some reason, he was feeling mean when William arrived for the Sales Meeting.

"Template?" Jonathan snapped at him. William's eyes glittered. Look at those lenses dive for cover. William was in his early twenties, uncomely, gay, nervous. He was supposed to have the agreed agenda and a place for agreed action notes. "Ah. It's just here." When William found his sheet, the agenda section was left blank.

Jonathan tapped the white space, and chuckled, and shook his head, like an indulgent father. "Billy, Billy, what am I going to do with you? Couldn't you remember to print it out? Here, use mine and photocopy it to me after the meeting. Did we get the form letters out?"

Billy had. Well, what do you know?

"All sixty? Great. Thanks very much. Now. The new fax number. We sent all our customers the new fax number, right? Fine. Then why did the Commission fax us a copy of a tender brief on the old number?"

Billy's face fell.

"They sent us a tender, Billy, and it went to our old number, which is with Interactive Media now, who are not necessarily our greatest chums, where it sat for a full afternoon. So now we have four days instead of a working week to develop a full tender with designs. Do you see the problem here?"

Billy face went white and distressed.

The real problem, Jonathan cursed to himself, is that management expects me to make sales without any funding, so I have to use poor Billy from Support who is as sweet as a lamb, but Jeez! Jonathan watched as William scrambled through his shaggy files. OK.

Jonathan decided to try a new management technique. He tried to make himself fancy Billy sexually. LLA, Low Level



Attraction, could generate good Team bonding. In fact, people with low to middle bisexuality scores had a favoured Starting-Gun Profile.

So Jonathan looked at Billy and tried, but Billy had chalk white skin and lank black hair, and spots, the thick, clotted, dumb kind of spot that never comes to a head.

I hate this guy, this puny, nervy little idiot; I just can't resist trying to break him.

"Um," said Billy, miserable, balancing his spread-eagled file on his lap. "Yeah, well, I, uh, didn't fax the Commission because it was among my problems to be resolved."

"You mean you didn't know the Commission was one of your clients?" Jonathan managed to say it more in sorrow than in anger.

"I think it was that I didn't know who were our contact names there."

Neither, now that he thought about it, did Jonathan. "OK," he sighed. "Look. Talk to Clara, she'll know them, and then just send the notification you've got. Don't apologize or let them know that we didn't tell them in time. If they ask, the number has just changed. I don't want them to know we had this little hiccup. OK?"

"OK," Billy murmured.

"And, Billy, please. Don't try to keep all your correspondence in one file? You'll find it easier if you keep things separate."

Billy thanked him for the advice. Then he suggested that Jonathan might like to come around to his place for drinks.

I don't believe this. This kid was making a pass at him, he was so desperate. OK, we're both playing the same LLA game. How can we both win? Don't be judgmental, turn the attraction, if that was what you could call it, into friendliness, team bonding.

"That's a great idea, Billy. But I've been feeling bad about not inviting you to my place. I think you've met my wife, but you've never even seen my daughter. Are you free next week?"

Billy looked relieved. Jonathan was relieved too, and thanked him for the job he was doing, and in the general thanking and summing up the invitations were forgotten.

Billy left and Jonathan sat back and sighed. He was feeling tired a lot these days. He saw Sally's face, pink glossy lips parted, as she gave a tiny cry. He sat still for a moment, his eyes closed.

It was 9.57. Jonathan couldn't help himself. He checked his scores again. He really must stop doing this. It was like when he got hooked on the I Ching, and had to have Chaos Therapy to kick it. But all he wanted was a breakdown, a

fuller breakdown of this morning's score with Simon.

Verbal content. 4.79

OK, I knew I was bad, but that bad?

Body Language: 4.5

What? Oh, come one. What was I supposed to do, pick my nose? Jonathan actioned a more in-depth analysis.

Artificiality, his machine told him, a lack of visible sincerity.

Christ! You can't move around this place. If I'd been sincere, I would have said, you fucked up that own-account job 18 months ago, and you've been a liability ever since and you've done nothing any better, so we're ditching you like we should have done even earlier. I was just trying to be fucking kind. What should I have done, told him to fuck off?

So what got me my good score? This breakdown is terrible.

10.00 Dead Space.

And the computer flipped itself out into a proactive intervention.

Suddenly, it started to play him the tape of the morning's session with Simon.

There he was, fat, stone-faced, saying, "It's not written for me. It's written for Personnel."

A full analysis scrolled up on the screen. Flesh tones,

oxygen use, body language, uncharacteristic verbals, atypical eye use.

Behavior typical of industrial sabotage. Rage mixed with satisfaction

In other words, Simon had become dangerous. Not a little bit dangerous, very dangerous. Determined, apparently, to get revenge

In-house sabotage is one of the greatest problems now facing both manufacturing and service industries. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I've been on the course. Jonathan glanced up at the door to make sure it was closed. He could verbal and no-one would hear. George was supposed to be seeing him, but George, thank heaven, was late as

usual.

"First." Jonathan asked the computer. "Why didn't you warn me before?"

Programed to hold all proactive interventions until Dead Space

"Alright, reprogram. If you get a priority like this again, you are to intervene immediately. Please confirm."

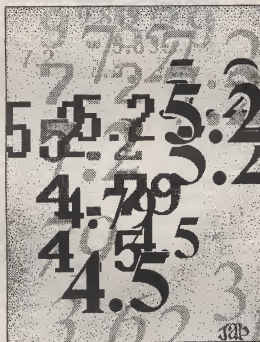
Confirmed

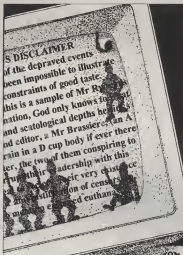
"What are the possible actions taken by Simon Hasley?"

Action taken

"Fine. What is it?"

There was no response at all. It was almost as though the





"Oh Jesus," and both he and Harriet cracked up.

"I want a breakdown of every invoice on this printout and why it's late. Friday will do. And please remember, that you are responsible for ensuring we hold to financial targets. If you don't, you aren't meeting the minimum requirements of your job. I'll give you a box four marking. And if it doesn't improve, I'll write one of those hilarious little warning letters. Oh, and Harriet, your anti-blood pressure medicine. I know about it. It does have strange side effects, doesn't it. I can recommend Medical Leave. I will be recommending a check-up."

In other words, baby, you may just have lost your job. Harriet's smile slipped.

He verbalized it. "Action. Store session. Copy H. Pednorowska's to the Medical Department."

All this counselling shit to one side, the thing he knew he was really good at was being a bit of a bastard.

Harriet. George. Thanks for coming to see me. Harriet, I'm sorry you're unwell. George, I'm sure you'll be able to cope with your invoicing problem. Please ask Simon to come in and see me."

Their smiles had not quite faded.

"Meeting over, Team."

Gloves off. Simon had slow reaction times. He needed time to think about things. Well, he had had a whole month to work through this, thanks to Jonathan being so nice. It had probably taken him all month, but he had done it. And he's got me by the balls. He can change my scores, and leave no trace, unless the Chairman is prepared to admit the existence of the password. The computer's got me and George on record and knows our suspicions but that's not proof. I have to wrong foot him. I could say that he'd been monitored telling Harriet what he'd done. But what if he hadn't, or asked "how could they read the note, it was in code?" Jonathan would just have to wing it.

Simon came back in. He looked as calm and unperturbed as this morning.

"An impressive display, Simon."

Simon was saying nothing.

"It wasn't age, you idiot," said Jonathan. "It wasn't slowed-down reaction times. Don't you know when you're being let off? They knew, Simon! That's why you were fired. You didn't think you could use the Chairman's password without all the right protocols did you? They were letting you go without any noise. Then you had to go and tamper with my scores this morning, you stupid, dumb, poor, idiot little lamb, and I don't know if I can stop it this time, Simon. I think they're going to send you to jail."

Simon sat unmoving, in silence. But silence was not a denial, or shocked surprise. Would that be enough?

"I mean, as if I didn't signal it, as if I didn't hear as dammit tell you, in those private little sessions, you've got a month, keep your nose clean. I don't want to see you go to jail!"

Jonathan raised his hands and let them fall. "I really thought you were smarter than that,"

Simon had not moved, not an involuntary flicker of the eyeballs, not a heave of the prison-patterned shirt. Except, he was weeping. He sat very still and a thick, heavy tear that seemed to be made of glucose crept down his cheek.

"They always have one up on you, don't they?" he said.

In the corner of Jonathan's screen, a tiny white square was flashing on and off, in complete silence. A security alert.

"You work your butt off, they keep you dancing for twenty years, and they make a fortune out of you."

This was going to be very sweet indeed, thought Jonathan. Talk about two birds with one stone. Fancy Accounts letting something like the password out. They'd all be for the high jump. Bloody Accounts, who were always breathing down Jonathan's neck about invoices, or performance scores or project costs or unit cost reduction. They would all have their necks wrung like chickens. What a wonderful world this could be.

"It was a dumb thing to do," Simon admitted, laying each word with a kind of finality, like bricks.

"Well. I reckon you'll have revenge. At least on Accounts," said Jonathan.

The door burst open, and Custody came in like it was a drug bust and they were Supercops. In their dumb blue little uniforms.

"What the fuck kept you?" Jonathan demanded.

"By the way, Simon," he added. "We didn't know for sure, until a second ago. Thanks."

Simon didn't move a muscle. When Jonathan checked later, he found he'd scored a ten. Hot damn, it felt good to be so creative.

He got home after fitting in his evening workout. Got up to one hundred on the bench press. Shows what a little adrenalin could do. He got home, to the ethnic wallpaper and the books and the CDs, and he knew he was not a bad man. Life was tough, but that was business. Home was different.

His wife was a painter, and she wore a smock covered in fresh pistachio, magenta, cobalt. He had to lean forward to kiss her lest the smock print paint on his suit. "We should hang that coat of yours in a gallery," he said. It would be nice to live like this too, in a quiet home, but then someone had to bring home the bacon.

"Daddy, Daddy," called Christine from the bedroom. She wouldn't go to sleep until she had seen him, no matter how long she had to wait, and she was not even his child. He went to her room and sat on the bed and kissed her. She smelled of orange juice and children's shampoo. "Play a game with me," she said, and out came the little screen. Mickey had to shoot the basketball through the hoop to escape the aliens. The score was on the screen. "Daddy, I got an eight!" she cried. He chuckled, but a part of his mind said in a slow, dark voice: get them young.

That night he dreamed he had old hands, and they mumbled through job ads. He couldn't feel anything with them. His fingers were dead.



The critique of **AMERICA** in contemporary Science Fiction

Tom Shippey

This is a revised
version of
The Mexican Lecture,
given by Tom Shippey
at Mexican in
Scarborough in
May 1993.

As with many people of my age, much of my early science fiction experience came from reading the works of Robert A Heinlein, both his widely-distributed "juveniles" and others. In later years I came to realise that Heinlein was representative of (and indeed deeply involved with, see further below) a particular strand of American politics. But in the 1950's and 1960's this was not apparent, or at least not to a teenager primarily interested in science fiction, pretty much to the exclusion of everything else. Even then, though, I can remember noticing a particular and repeated plot feature which I used to call in those days the "Heinlein switch" – a classic example, as I again now realise, of the deep significance of plot features at once redundant and unpredictable. Where a plot points in a certain direction, bits of action continuing the plot in that direction are, perhaps, there to save the author trouble and effort. Bits of action which reverse or stall the plot, on the other hand, are likely to

be there because they have such high significance for the author that he cannot bring himself to leave them out. The redundant incident is thus often a good guide to the core of a text.

A clear example of what I mean comes in the Heinlein juvenile *Tunnel to the Stars* (1955). The basic situation of this is that a group of high school students is dumped, as a part of their survival training, on an alien planet, only to find itself accidentally marooned. In this situation the central character, Rod Walker, soon shows himself in true Heinlein style to be an able leader. He is practical, decisive, survival-oriented and fair.

Nevertheless he loses the election for leadership to one Grant Cowper, whom Heinlein, again in characteristic style, consistently presents as the archetypal administrator/bureaucrat. He is impractical, corrupt, personally lazy, "all talk and no results", fascinated by committees and by the mechanics of government, which to him is "the greatest invention of mankind". His political abilities ensure he wins the election against Rod. But in the

end he rejects Rod's warning to move camp from an unsafe site; finds the camp under attack from migrating lemming-like carnivores; and is killed unnecessarily in the migration.

At this stage the logic of the story would seem to demand a cry of "I told you so" from Heinlein-author, Walker-character, or both, followed by a prompt removal from the camp. Instead, at the end of Chapter 13 Rod Walker declares that he will not give up Cowper's ill-chosen and dangerous site to the carnivores:

"no dirty little beasts, all teeth and no brains, are going to drive us out. We're men... and men don't have to be driven out, but by the likes of those. Grant paid for this land - and I say stay here and keep it for him!"

In the next chapter we find a memorial to the inept Cowper in the village square.

Why does Heinlein carry out this switch, not once but repeatedly? In a similar sequence in the non-juvenile *Magic Inc* (in book form, 1950), the State Senate, set in this story in an alternate "world where magic works", is about to pass a Bill which will make magic in effect a monopoly run by diabolic powers. Heinlein describes with gusto the apparently ludicrous way in which state governments conduct their business - based clearly on the real mechanisms of US government - and leads up to the sudden and unexpected passing of the disastrous Bill, against all kinds of assurances that it would fail. Next day the central characters see the state governor and explain their justified fears. He turns down all their pleas - on grounds of pressure of business:

"Mr Fraser, there you see fifty-seven bills passed by this session of the legislature. Every one of them has some defect. Every one of them is of vital importance..."

One would think that invasions from Hell would take a certain priority even so, but just where one would expect someone to say as much, Heinlein again switches sympathies:

I made some remark about dunder-headed, compromising politicians when Joe cut me short.

"Shut up, Archie! Try running a State sometime instead of a small business and see how easy you find it!"

I shut up.

This scene is immediately followed by

conclusive evidence that the main instigator of the Bill is indeed a demon, but it does not seem to alter the rebuke. Heinlein appears to be saying, in a curiously unceptual way, that government is so difficult that only professional governors can cope with it. Some would feel that there are more small businessmen who could run a State than professional governors who could run a small business, but Heinlein is not among them.

Behind both these odd but typical incidents lies a fascination with, and a deep respect for the mechanics of government, and specifically for the government and Constitution of the USA. One of the most surprising details in *Tunnel to the Stars* is the revelation that Rod Walker's group contains not one but two members who not only have read the Virginia Bill of Rights, but have memorised it: Heinlein does not indicate this as unusual. This fascination shows itself also in scene after scene dealing with the details of debate procedure, points of order, points of privilege, motions to adjourn, "cinch bills", riders, legal fictions etc. These all seem wildly out of place in conditions of elementary survival; the story and the author insist they are not. Heinlein comes over as presenting simultaneously extreme and convincing criticism of the incompetence of democratic government; and total acceptance of its necessity, in spite of that incompetence. It is this apparent double standard which I identified as a teenager as shocking. I now realise that Heinlein meant it as part of a specifically American ideology of freedom and "constitutionality". Nevertheless, and in spite of that conscious intention, one could say that in classic American science fiction of the Heinlein era, belief in American ideals was so dominant as to make any sustained critique of America, no matter what the surface of the story indicated, literally impossible.

Nearly forty years later the situation is very different. Yet science fiction authors continue to show their debt to science fiction tradition, and to Heinlein in particular, at one and the same time rejecting him and arguing with him in true parent-child style. At once the most and the least Heinleinian of contemporary authors is

Kim Stanley Robinson. His major work to date is the brilliantly conceived "Orange County" trilogy, consisting of *The Wild Shore* (1984), *The Gold Coast* (1988) and *Pacific Edge* (1990), each of them a near future story set in the same location, Orange County, California, and presenting quite clearly different "time lines" for America: post-holocaust primitivism (*The Wild Shore*), dystopian capitalism (*The Gold Coast*) and utopian socialism (*Pacific Edge*). The last of these, of course, seems about as far from Heinlein as one could get, and on one level it is. It presents the story of a modest hero, Kevin, trying to preserve a patch of land from development in a largely autonomous community in California, some time next century. Kevin's opponent is the town mayor Alfredo: one might note that mayor is the title given to Rod Walker's opponent Grant, and that the autonomous nature of the community in which they live leaves Kevin and Alfredo almost as isolated in their battle as Heinlein's high school students on an alien planet. Alfredo, again like Grant Cowper, is good at politics if personally corrupt, and soon has Kevin out-manoeuvred. Very like Heinlein's Archie Fraser in *Magic Inc*, Kevin then goes to see a more professional politician to get her on his side, only to have her tell him (just like Archie's wiser friend Joe in the excerpt above) that he cannot fight the system. The irony is that Robinson's politician is a Green, just like Kevin, and so in theory committed to his cause of conservation. But there are some issues you cannot win, she declares; it's impossible to fight every case; in effect paraphrasing the state governor of *Magic Inc*, she declares that "Politics is the art of the possible".

At this point, if Robinson's Kevin were a Heinlein hero, he would bow to superior authority and the mechanisms of government; actually, Kevin loses his temper and walks out. The significance of the walkout and the rejection of practical politics is underlined by the background figure of Tom Barnard, Kevin's grandfather. He figures in all three of the works in Robinson's trilogy. In *The Wild Shore* he is an "Ish" figure (the name is taken from George Stewart's classic *Earth Abides* (1950)) - a hangover from the past who



explains America to a disbelieving younger generation in a primitive future. In *The Gold Coast* he is a marginalised old man dying in a hospital. In *Pacific Edge* he is the substitute narrator, the creator of the novel's utopian world. But in *Pacific Edge* the marked-off sequence of scenes in which he is the central figure is there to show us (a) how Utopia arrived (b) the dystopia that could have happened instead. For most of Barnard's life in *Pacific Edge* the world seems to be sliding, not towards Kevin's Californian Utopia, but to a familiar dystopia: rigid controls, paranoid American isolationism, death camps for dissidents, AIDS used as a pretext for ever harsher government control. Barnard has lived through all this, trying to write a Utopia as he does so. But at one point, in despair, imprisoned within a dissidents' camp on false charges of carrying AIDS, he tears up his book. This book-within-a-book, in a sense, is the world of *Pacific Edge*; if it had stayed turned up, the book *Pacific Edge* could not have been written. What saves Barnard, and the Utopia, and *Pacific Edge*, is a characteristic American phenomenon, namely release from the camp by a lawyer on grounds of "procedural irregularity". But the *advocatus ex machina* goes further and recruits Barnard for a serious and ultimately successful attempt to reform the USA from the inside:

Look, Mr Barnard, he said. Tom it takes more than an individual effort. And more than the old institutions. We've started an organisation here in Washington, DC, so far it's sort of a multi-issue lobbying group, but essentially we're trying to start a new political party, something like the Green parties in Europe.

He described what they were doing, what their program was. Change the law of the land, the economic laws, the environmental laws, the relationship between local and global, the laws of property.

Now there are laws forbidding that kind of change, I said. That's what they were trying to get me on

that education is not. At least twice in *Pacific Edge* we have the situation for a "Heinlein switch"; but both times the characters refuse to bow to *Realpolitik* or accept the *status quo* – rejecting Heinlein, and criticising America, as they do so.

The key to Barnard's reforms in *Pacific Edge* is reform of American corporation laws. Utopia is the result of forced legal decentralisation, with a concomitant new balance between individual and corporate power. What could happen if this radical step were not taken is presented vividly in *The Gold Coast*, the most realistic and least science fictional of the works in this science fiction trilogy. In this book corporate capitalism and the defence industry continue to run California, and for much of the time we find ourselves being educated in the realities of Washington power politics and (especially) defence procurement.

Star Wars
was nonsense, even by
science fiction standards

This is a world in which Robert Heinlein figured not as an author but as a real political influence. There is a widespread report (the essential truth of the report was confirmed at the Mexican lecture by Norman Spinrad) that President Reagan was convinced of the need for the "Star Wars" initiative largely by a committee of science fiction writers, of whom Heinlein was the head. The irony is that "Star Wars" was nonsense, even by science fiction standards. A further story is told (evidence for this is harder to find. The incident seems to be hinted at in Allen Steele's novel *Clarke County, Space* (1990) but this may well be "reading in") that at one meeting of science fiction authors, Arthur C Clarke – perhaps the only living hard-SF author comparable in eminence to Heinlein – remarked that orbiting

laser-armed satellites were ridiculous. After all, if the USA launched a multi-billion dollar satellite orbiting one way, all the USSR had to do was to launch a ten-rouble bucket of nails orbiting the other. Collision at double orbital speeds would destroy the satellite – and of course the nails. But the nails would be a billion times cheaper. Faced with this evident truth – the story goes – Heinlein told Clarke that as an Englishman he had no business to criticise US government policy. Clarke shrugged and left.

If true, the scene would strikingly confirm what was said above about the Heinlein generation being unable to imagine, or to tolerate, a critique of America. Whether it is true or not, Robinson in *The Gold Coast* repeats exactly the same argument about the satellite and the bucket of nails, but puts it in the mouth of a disillusioned "Star Wars" scientist. Robinson in fact presents with a mixture of empathy and horror the surreal world of the California defence industry: at the centre of his story are a father and son, the son (Jim) a committed anti-war saboteur, the father (Dennis) a senior executive in Laguna Space Research. With the "fabril" bias so characteristic of science fiction (for discussion of this word (it is not my coinage), see my "Introduction" to *The Oxford Book of Science Fiction Stories*, ed. T.A.S. (1992)) *The Gold Coast* makes it hard for its readers not to sympathise with the latter, the weapon maker. Dennis McPherson's problem is this. He has developed a successful weapon, Stormbee, a pilotless computerised missile launcher which can on its own put an end to the threat of the "Big Contingency" (a Soviet armoured attack in central Europe). No tanks could live with Stormbee. But Stormbee is a "black program", commissioned by the USAF, but on a disavowable basis. Dennis's firm is however commissioned to develop another program, Ball Lightning, a method of destroying Soviet ICBMs in space with lasers. Ball Lightning is essentially non-feasible. The only way it could ever have been sold to the USAF and to the government was by a pilot study test; unfortunately, the test was a "strapped chicken". Robinson says here, dropping out of science fiction into fact, that:

Would Heinlein agree with this scene? Yes, in that it presents the practical thing to do as lobbying and litigating. No, in the declared opposition to "the old institutions". In the same way Kevin's education in practical politics is highly Heinelesque. But his refusal to accept



the strategic defence program has a long history of such meaningless tests: they blew up Sidewinder missiles with lasers, when Sidewinders were designed to seek out energy sources and therefore were targets that would latch onto the beams destroying them. They sent electron beams through rarefied gases, and claimed that the beams would work in the very different environments of vacuum or atmosphere... and they set target missiles on the ground, and strained them with guy wires so that they would burst apart when heated by lasers, in the famous "strapped chicken" tests.

To return to McPherson's problem. the USAF decides to punish his firm for poor progress with Ball Lightning by disavowing Stormbee™ thus leaving Laguna Space stuck with the research and development costs and no way of recouping them. This problem could apparently admit two solutions: one, a technical one, develop Ball Lightning; two, a political one, expose the USAF's deceit and force it into honest bidding and contracting. The technical solution is in reality impossible. Can the political solution work (as it does in *Pacific Edge* via Barnard's reforms, and as it would in a Heinlein "juvenile")

The answer in *The Gold Coast* is certainly "no". But again the possibilities are put in highly Heinleinian terms. As Dennis's friend Dan, the disillusioned scientist, rants at the folly of pitting satellites against nails, at the craziness of the whole industry, and at the immense waste of capitalist competition in defence, Dennis (both pragmatist and idealist) tells him:

"That's the way it is".

Dan stares at him dully. "It's the American way, eh Mac?"

"That's right. The American way."

The phrase is picked up a hundred pages later, as it seems that the USAF will be legally compelled to play fair:)

The air force tried to assert that it was above the system, outside the network, now the rest of the network is going to drag them back into it. It's the American way, stumbling forward in its usual clumsy, inefficient style – maddening to watch, but ultimately fair.

We are close here to a "Heinlein switch": an assertion that while much of the action has been maddening in its incompetence, nevertheless the mechanisms of government will work properly in the end, while the end will show that the frustration and

incompetence were unavoidable, even essential, all parts of "the American way".

But again, that is not what happens. Practical politics, the art of the possible, force Dennis's firm to remember that in this industry the US government is the only employer. It cannot be antagonised. Even when proved wrong, it has to be allowed to be right. Dennis is ordered to withdraw, his successful program is closed, and he is fired. The "American way" turns out to be what his impractical sponger of a son always argued, a kind of "group hallucination". In this story the capable and efficient person, Dennis, the Heinlein hero-in-potential, does not make alliance with the politicians, excuse their failings and subscribe to their beliefs. Instead they destroy him; and to make humiliation worse his useless son, who cannot even hold a nut steady without grotesque accidents – a character who would be ruthlessly eliminated in a Heinlein world – his son is given the ultimate best of the argument. What *The Gold Coast* seems to say is that Heinlein, Robinson's authorial ancestor, was wrong about (a) *Star Wars* (b) "the American way" (c) "the art of the possible" (d) the qualities needed for survival. *The Gold Coast* and *Pacific Edge* between them show what America does wrong and what it could do right. Between them they mount a fierce and positive critique. Yet in their deep interest in political manoeuvring and their concern for more than technical solutions both books show a deep engagement with Heinlein. For their critique of America to be possible, Heinlein's refusal to entertain one had to be absorbed and refuted.

The two latter volumes of Robinson's trilogy are distinguished by their close, detailed and informed realism, even within the science fiction mode. The first volume of the trilogy, however – as I have argued elsewhere – operates to some extent by a method which I call "the cancellation of iconicity". (See my article "The Fall of America in Science Fiction" in the essay collection *Fictional Space*, ed. T.A.S. (1991)). This is actually a very familiar mode on the covers of science fiction books and magazines: one takes a recognised icon – the Statue of Liberty is a

favourite, but the White House or Nelson's Column would do as well – and shows it ruined, buried, altered, visited by alien tourists, its current iconic force denied (along with, by implication, the civilisation which conferred that force).

It is interesting that this mode of operation has been very strongly taken up by two further contemporary critiques of America, both works of great power, both written by established science fiction authors but neither readily classifiable as science fiction, and neither of them as far as I know considered for any literary award in spite of their merits – a sign of how hard it still is for authors to climb out of the science fiction "ghetto" or erase the science fiction stigma. The two works are Thomas Disch's *The M.D.* (1991) and Geoff Ryman's *Was...!* (1992).

It is significant that I cannot explain the plot of the latter without also explaining its structure, a constraint till now rare in science fiction; the complex structure of Ryman's novel in a way mirrors the careful typology of its title, *Was...!*, and may have something to do with the decision of the literary editor of *The Guardian* initially to reject my review of it, on the grounds that he "did not know what category to put it in" just so. One way of explaining Ryman's novel, however, would be to say that it starts off from L. Frank Baum's children's classic *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), and puts forward the premise that its heroine, Dorothy Gael, was not fantasy, but real: a real girl, living on the real Kansas prairie, who was not snatched up by a tornado from her dull grey home and transferred to Oz, but lived on in Kansas. If this were true, Ryman proposes, she could have met the real Baum in 1881, and fired him to write his "modernised fairy tale, in which" – as Baum says in his 1900 preface – "the wonderment and joy are retained and the heartaches and nightmares are left out." Baum meant there the "heartaches and nightmares" of the traditional fairy tale, but Ryman applies the phrase to the heartaches and nightmares of 19th and 20th century Kansas. The story he tells of Dorothy Gael is one of diphtheria, loneliness, physical abuse from corporal punishment at school and sexual abuse from "Uncle



Henry" at home. In this story Baum's attempt to help the real Dorothy, while a teacher at her school, by believing her accounts of sexual abuse, leads only to him being fired and her being ostracised as a case of sexual hysteria. Dorothy lives on as a crazy prostitute, to be discovered 75 years later as a very old woman at the Waposage, Kansas, Home for the Mentally Incapacitated – where she finally sees the film *The Wizard of Oz* on TV. Only she knows it isn't true. Not the Oz bits, the Kansas bits. For one thing, she knows quite well that her dog Toto was not allowed to live on as her inseparable companion, but was killed by Auntie Em and Uncle Henry for being a nuisance.

Meanwhile the book Baum wrote, and even more the 1939 Judy Garland film based on it, have reached iconic status in the USA, becoming a traditional part of the American family Christmas. Ryman explores, however, the reality of the film: "Judy Garland's" real name (Frances Gumm), her relationship with her mother (who actually sued her daughter for support before dying in poverty), the sad story of her father (a movie theatre manager whom Ryman presents as continually forced to flee from one place to another by his homosexuality, of course greeted with no tolerance in the California of the 1930s). In "Was..." the Hollywood world meanwhile produces an actor who makes his fortune by working in horror movies of child murder, contracts AIDS, and spends the last weeks of his life obsessively trying to find the reality behind the Oz story, as if searching for a lost innocence; in this he is assisted by the psychiatrist whose life was changed by meeting the real Dorothy Gael dying marginalised in a hospital (like the Tom Barnard of Robinson's *The Gold Coast*). Another way of describing this multi-stranded novel would be to see it as a progressive exhumation of the real past from beneath multiple layers of concealment; and it is worth noting that all three of the novels in Robinson's trilogy begin with the characters *digging something up*.

And yet a third way of describing "Was..." would be to say that it is a study of an American icon. *The Wizard of Oz* as book (a book for many years banned, ignored or censored by libraries and scholars); as

film (a film which to begin with lost money, only to be rescued by TV rights and the custom of showing it on TV at Christmas); and as cultural signifier – the work which above all tells American children that "home is best" and that the colours of Oz/fantasy should in the end be left behind for the greyness of Kansas/reality. In an interesting afterword Ryman counterpoints realism or history on the one hand, and fantasy on the other, and says we should distinguish them carefully. "And then use them against each other". In a way his "history" of Dorothy Gael is an assault on an American fantasy. But then of course his history is fantasy (entirely made up, if grounded in real sociology), while the Oz fantasy has come true (at least as a com-

Science Fiction has had only limited or doubtful success in the real world

mercial phenomenon). Just the same, a very blunt paraphrase of Ryman's book would be to say that it is an attack on an icon and on the self-satisfying beliefs that icon has served. It points to a real tragedy, a real corruption, spreading from the American heartlands to the Hollywood of Robinson's Orange County; the corruption is concealed by the icon made in Tinseltown.

Ryman's presentation of this hidden corruption through the image of AIDS in my view challenges comparison with Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* (1968), in which the spread of cancer via primary and secondary tumours is seen as an image of corruption working its way through the entire body of Soviet Russia. A similar metaphor runs through Tom Disch's *The M.D.*. The subtitle of this work is *A Horror Story*, and the elements of fantasy in it are stronger than in any of the

books considered so far (the whole action is initiated, for one thing, by a vision of Santa Claus). Yet the last third of the book takes us into familiar, quasi-realistic science fiction territory in which America, as in sections of Robinson's *Pacific Edge*, has become a land of death camps, refugees, draconian government control abetted (as in Robinson's *Gold Coast*) by private but government-fattened companies with names like Medical Defense Systems. The reason for this version of military law is not AIDS but the plague for which AIDS was only a warm-up: ARVIDS, or *Acute Random Vector Immune Deficiency Syndrome*. "Random Vector" here means that this version of the disease, instead of needing direct blood contamination to be passed on, is transmitted casually, like a cold or flu. Anyone can get it, and no-one knows why.

Within *The M.D.*, though, the cause for ARVIDS is identified as a fantastic one. Sister Mary Symphorosa, in a Catholic primary school, told little Billy Michaels there was no Santa Claus; he was a false god who must not be worshipped. As if in denial, a true god appears to Billy in the image of Santa Claus, and gives him a gift of curse and blessing, via a magic caduceus, the symbol of Mercury, also of the American medical profession. Billy uses his caduceus to reduce his stepbrother to a vegetable (Colmar's Syndrome); to make a disapproving teacher pathologically foul-mouthed (Tourette's Syndrome); to inflict strokes, baldness, tooth decay or asphyxiation on those who annoy him. He also uses his gifts to confer health, for the odd thing is that Billy does not come over as an unsympathetic person. His actions are often provoked by his strange but no longer particularly untypical family circumstances. Disch uses as his epigraph for the novel a soothing statement from the *New York Times*:

The young murderer doesn't come from a typical American family. The average American parent doesn't need to fear being murdered.

What is average? What is typical? In the saccharine world of American TV, where everyone watches *The Wizard of Oz* at Christmas – we find Billy's father crying over it on Page 39 – the American family



is what it always was, father, mother, two or three children. In Billy's family, marked by divorce as is now normal, there are six parents or step-parents (counting his mother's second husband's first wife and his father's second wife's first husband), with four children, some half-siblings, but some with only legal relationships (like Billy's stepmother's daughter by another father). The complexity of family relationships is mirrored by the tortuous nature of economic ones. Billy is brought up by a stepfather, Ben, whose daughter, Judith, is passionately in favour of social causes including public health. Her father's research, however, is largely funded by the American Tobacco Association; he has to be polite and hospitable to Public Relations men who professionally deny any link between smoking and cancer. Billy puts a curse on the tobacco executive's lighter: anyone who smokes a cigarette lit by it will get lung cancer.

One can see that Billy has a strong sense of justice denied by his family's way of life. There is a terrible fairness about (some of) what he does. Yet he is a murderer; he does come, regardless of the *New York Times*, from a "typical American family", even if that family does not fit the family icon; and in the end he gets his M.D. and becomes, like most American M.D.s, extremely rich. Billy is especially rich, though, because he controls ARVIDS. We do not find out the mechanism till late on in the book, but what Billy has done is to put a curse on a prize bull:

Let the meaty steers you breed
At the end of ten full years
Infest with plague, infest with tears
One half percent of those they feed
Once this contagion has occurred
May it only be wholly cured
By my hand, my work, my word
Upon receipt of the fee agreed
Now to your task, and breed, bull, breed."

The name of the bull – and I return here to my early point about the significance of plot items which are both redundant and unpredictable – is *American Pride*. Disch could obviously have called the bull anything. Calling it "American Pride" sends an unmistakable metaphoric signal; more unmistakable even than presenting the cause of ARVIDS as eating hamburgers.

The M.D. begins in this way to look like

an allegory, an allegory of what has rotted society, i.e. and in reverse order of their appearance in this paraphrase, (i) nationalistic pride (ii) individual medical profiteering (iii) utterly dishonest public relations (iv) domestic and sexual breakdown (v) refusal – see the *New York Times* quotation above – to admit any of the above. This is an extremely damning indictment. Yet it all stems, I repeat, from a source, Billy Michaels, whom it is hard to see as simply evil. He is, rather, an individual economic unit doing the best he can for himself, as he is supposed to under orthodox economic ideology.

Disch's critique and Ryman's link through the image of AIDS. Disch links with Robinson in their shared vision of a death camp future. Ryman links with Robinson geographically, in their shared view of Orange County as the place where the American dream and the American reality (Hollywood and the defense industry) are in closest juxtaposition. All three authors are writing very specifically, sometimes using the exact phrases, about "the American way", "American pride", American icons, the American dream. What they have to say, one realises, would be intolerable and unspeakable to authors of an older generation like Heinlein, with his veneration for American history/American myth (Not easily distinguishable for Heinlein, as one can see from his novel *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966). In this the American War of Independence is replayed on the Moon, with the addition of heavy layers of sentiment), for "constitutionality", for the ideology of freedom and government, cheque and balance. Yet Robinson at least is very strongly in a Heinlein tradition, with his combination of severe criticism of America and deep affection – "We were a good country", protests Tom Barnard in *The Wild Shore* – as also in his concern, if an exasperated concern, with practical politics. In Chapter 51 of *The Gold Coast* Jim McPherson, the shiftless son, recalls:

Johnson's ultimate test for literature, the most important question. Can it be turned to use? When you read a book, and go back into the world.

Can it be turned to use?
How did it get this way?

Jim finds history useful in answering the last question; so does Ryman in his "exhumation": Disch uses a different model, fantasy or allegory, to answer the same question. But one could ask the penultimate question. "Can it be turned to use?", of all these science fiction or fantasy works. And while it could be argued that science fiction has had only limited or doubtful success in the real world – motivating NASA, but also motivating "Star Wars" – it still seems to have a collective faith in the bedrock proposition of its founding father, H.G. Wells. "If you don't like something, you can change it". In recent years, Fred Pohl has given a convincing account of how democracy could be rescued by technology (by getting rid of the mayors and the power brokers, the Cowpers and the Alfredos, see the first section of his *The Years of the City* (1984)); Robinson has suggested that the key point is corporate law, and that this could be changed from the inside by the traditional route of litigation from Washington. Both these points would be recognised at least, perhaps even accepted, by a resurrected Heinlein. Even in the dystopian analyses of Disch and Ryman, American authors – Ryman is actually a Canadian – are trying to persuade their fellow citizens not to like what they're told to like; and to change it. As the disillusioned scientists of *The Gold Coast* tell each other, this may not work obviously or at once, but it is still, and not ironically, the American way.



Many of the talks given at *Mexicon 3* and *4*, were recorded from the sound desk, including this one. It captures Tom Shippey's inimitable delivery perfectly. The tapes have been donated to the Science Fiction Foundation at Liverpool, but *Mexicon* have allowed us to make copies available to readers of *SF Nexus* and *Interzone*. If you are interested, the tapes cost £5 each, from *SF Nexus*, PO Box 1123, Brighton BN1 6EX. For a list of the available tapes, send a small S.A.E. to the above address.



The Greening of the SLAGHEAPS

Christina Lake



18

RHUBARB

My name is Maria Lennox and I love rhubarb. No, I'm not pregnant, or anything like that. In fact I paid the child-avoidance tax a couple of years back and had myself sterilised, though I haven't told Calvin yet. No, the point is, I'm on this new diet to find out what's making me ill. At first, I just thought it was ongoing senility – hit the thirty barrier and look what happens, you start to fall to pieces. Well, I did, anyway. First the headaches, then the lethargy, then the attacks of non-strategic amnesia. Still, when my legs started to swell up like force-fed tubers, and I came out in a green and purple rash, I realised something extremely unnatural was going on. And you should see the colour of my vomit too.

After a few weeks of me failing to suffer in silence, Cal gives in, lets me have an account code and tells me to get myself a doctor. He can't bear illness. Not if it means HIM looking after ME and not vice versa. So I trot down the corridor to MediCare, or whatever they call themselves these days, and ask for the cheapest medic on their books, figuring they all use the same machines anyway, and what the hell, I could do with a bit of spare spending money. So they give me Dr. Gardiner, two minutes a month, transferable to immediate family members, for a full year starting 6/3/2023. A real bargain. Admittedly, Dr. Gardiner looks as if she's

about sixty going on a hundred, but she gives me a full five minutes on the diagnosis machine (at no extra cost) then comes out with her theory. "You, my girl," she says, looking at me through actual spectacles, "are suffering from a masked allergy."

It turns out that allergies can be every bit as cunning as your average human being. Now, normally, when you're allergic to something you know it. Like if your body can't cope with cheese, you throw up, and if you're allergic to cats you'll sneeze and come out in a rash. Not me, though. I have to have the most perverse kind of allergies going, don't I? Something is making me ill, but that something is disguising itself as one of the things I really like. Which means that all I have to do is identify what it is I have a positive craving for, and then eureka!, that's the one that's mucking up my system.

The last thing Gardiner said before she flushed me out of her office was to keep a diary of what I'm eating (or not eating), and we'd discuss it again in a month. So, I bought this brand new dictapad with some of the spare money, spoke in "rhubarb", and pressed the underline key. Then I sat for a while, looking at the blank rectangle, and thought, what the hell, why not make it a real diary? So here we are, my new diary friend, hot on the trail of that fiendish masked allergy.

Rhubarb. Go on, ask me. Why rhubarb, Maria dear? Right, let me tell you. I first had rhubarb at my grandmother's place, back when I was a kid. My mother used to send me there for a month in the summer to get away from the air pollution. Not my brother, just me, and it was the very best time of the whole year. My gran lived in this grey stone cottage by the lake, where I could sit in the window seat at the top of the stairs reading real books by writers with funny names like Tove Jansson or Elfrida Vipont, and dust danced in sunbeams by the old piano and the swing flew you up above the bushes to where you could touch the mountain peaks with your toes. Gran grew her own rhubarb in the garden, and from the first time she cooked it, it tasted to me like the best food I'd ever had.

Somehow I just naturally assumed that everyone was as batty about rhubarb as me, until I had my first boyfriend round for tea. "It's rhubarb and custard tonight," I told him. "Rhubarb," I emphasised proudly, "flown all the way from my gran's garden. You'll love it." He didn't. He wouldn't eat a mouthful, so my mum made extra custard, and after she'd gone, he and my brother had a food fight while I played my CDs backwards to let them know I was annoyed.

Calvin was no better. It was soon after I came to live down here in the "Old Friends" complex, and I decided to make rhubarb crumble. By then there was no more rhubarb in gran's garden; Mum was still trying to sell the cottage, but the lake had shrunk too far and no-one wanted it. So, I tried the fruit and veg dispenser, but of course it didn't have any. Then I thought: "I know, I'll go outside, to the market in Bubblestone." By then, I was totally obsessed with the idea of getting hold of some rhubarb. You see what I mean about a craving. So I got on the tour bus with all the old biddies who were being allowed out for that day and rattled off to Bubblestone. Sure enough, there was rhubarb on one of the stalls, but the idiot in charge said that Chaingang Press had just bought it all up for the launch of their over-eighties line. I asked him where he'd got it from, and he told me up at the new farm. By then I'd come so far that I thought I might as well walk to the farm, get my rhubarb, and catch the bus back from there. So, there I was, home half an hour after Cal, but triumphantly brandishing my rhubarb. "Rhubarb crumble for us tonight, love," I told him, never dreaming he wouldn't be pleased. But Cal can be a moody bastard when it suits him, and it certainly suited him then. Just because I'd stayed at home to cook rather than helping him lay his stupid water pipes. "I hate rhubarb," he said. And he took my rhubarb, broke the sticks in half and threw them out the window, all over Ms

Causeby's anti-arthritis work-out kit. I think the cat must have eaten it all as that night it was sick, and the next morning all the rhubarb had gone apart from a few chewed up pieces of stringy green bark

MUSHROOMS

Dr. Gardiner told me I can't be allergic to rhubarb because it's seasonal and hard to get, and the culprit's going to be something people have every day like coffee or bacon or those whole-wheat bread things they sell at the bakers.

Well, I never drink coffee because it makes me hyper, and I don't eat meat much either (the only religion my family had was high church Vegetarianism), and as for the breads, I happen to know they're pumped full of happy drugs for the old dears, so I never touch them. But the idea's sound enough, and I thought to myself, what do I eat loads and loads of, in fact nearly every day, and it came to me – mushrooms. Well, I don't precisely have a craving for mushrooms, but Cal certainly does. We do eat them most days, and even though I have been known to call them 'those horrid, nasty, fungal things' (just for Cal's benefit, you know), I really do quite like them.

It's a bit strange because, when I was little, I used to drive my mum batty by picking all the mushrooms out of her cooking. However small they were, or however few she put in, I always found them and come

the end of the meal there would be a pile of the little darlings sitting accusingly on the rim of my plate. Then my brother would say, "Can I eat them, Mum," and without waiting for permission he'd help himself to my plate and scoff the lot.

My grandmother didn't believe in mushrooms. She said that anything that grew in dark dank cellars was highly suspect, and that she had never trusted mushrooms anyway, not since a bad experience with them back in the sixties. In fact, by then she only used the vegetables she could see growing in her own garden – potatoes, carrots, broad beans, and of course peas. We'd sit together on the wooden porch at the back, shelling peas and talking about the local characters; the surf-board jockeys, the yachtsmen with their loud clothing and louder parties, and a whole supporting cast of lifeguards, water-sport instructors and bar-staff. Gran liked to make up stories about them – they were visiting celebrities from Mars who had to live on a diet of champagne to survive; they had just kidnapped one of the heiresses, and the loud music was to cover the screams.



And though we both knew the stories weren't true, they sent us off into fits of giggling hysteria whenever we saw any of the protagonists of our fantasies.

I think Gran must have looked very like Mum does now, except that she always wore her hair loose, and kept it hennaed red, while Mum likes hers short and natural, though I can't understand why. But back then Gran was slim like Mum, and would leap down the steps of the porch like a little girl and race me to the lake, where she would always be swimming long before I got my tummy past the difficult bit where the water's like the hand of death on your innards.

Anyhow, me and Gran, we maintained an anti-mushroom pact, all the way through my childhood and adolescence, and in fact I never ate a single mushroom until I met Cal.

The thing about Cal is that he always has to be right. He can justify everything he does, explain all his behaviour, and even make the irrational sound sane. It's only when it comes to mushrooms that he begins to give himself away. He's really obsessed with mushrooms – not just with eating them, but with peeling them too. He won't let me buy those button mushrooms that are so clenched in on themselves that if you pull the skin a quarter of the cap comes away in your hand. Or the two-day old mushrooms where the skin's shrivelled so far into the flesh that you couldn't separate the two with a scalpel. No, I have to intercept the morning supply train, and go through their stocks until I find those wide-open field mushrooms that look like umbrellas or the succulent round ones with skin so lightly curled in on the stem that you know it will come away with the slightest flick of a finger-nail.

Once I've bought the mushrooms, Cal takes over. First, he dismembers them, then he pulls the skin off piece by piece till they're sitting white and exposed on the chopping board like the abandoned children of some alien spore, then he takes over the best frying pan, heats up the butter in it (no, of course margarine won't do), crushes in garlic, pours on a libation of wine and sacrifices them to the god of fire.

After which he has the nerve to tell his friends that he loves cooking. In fact, Cal's relationship with the kitchen is rather like that of a master surgeon with his patient. He only goes in there when it's been scrubbed free of germs and anaesthetised by biological detergent in order to perform a specific set of tasks which he firmly believes he and he alone can do successfully, then retires triumphant to pronounce on the happy outcome of the operation, taking all the credit and

none of the blame. But then, that's Cal all over. I don't think that he's ever once in his life said the words "I'm wrong."

RED WINE

Please God, don't let it be red wine. I don't think I could live without red wine. Yesterday, I stayed in bed all day, but today I hobbled out to the doctor, and told her that eliminating the mushrooms had damn near eliminated my marriage. She said that I had to be honest with myself, and that maybe I wasn't being honest enough because it was going to be the thing I really and truly didn't want to give up that was doing the damage. So here I am, sitting in bed with the cat and the telly and all my Elvis videos thinking wine, oh no, it's going to be wine.

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not an alcoholic, but I do like a little drink sometimes, especially now I can't leave our happy home beneath the hills. Cal's withdrawn my automatic exit pass to the outside world, supposedly because I'm too ill, but really, I suspect, because he thinks I should be helping him, not wasting my time off on jaunts. It's his opinion that all my allergy problems would clear up if I just put in a good day's work with him, tapping more water from some wasteful leisure lake, no doubt. As if I'm in any state to walk, let alone work. All the same, knowing that I can't get out is driving me crazy. I know I can still meander round in that maze of escalators and tunnels they call the

shopping centre, if I have the energy, watch Network TV till it comes out my ears, or wait for one of my friends, like Rose or Vivienne, to visit, but it's not the same. No more trips to Bubblestone for little Maria, and no more weekends at mother's, at least not till I shape up.

When I get too despondent, I remind myself of how I used to enthuse about this place to mother when I first came here. No more risk of skin cancer, I told her. No more queuing up to register for food points. No pollution, no violence, and no urban madness, unless you count assaults on your intelligence by the pre-Alzheimer pack down on the bottom floor in the hospital.

Somehow it doesn't quite convince me any more. We all need a bit of sun and non-recycled air to keep us going, even the over-seventies, whatever Cal may say. I've only been here a year, but sometimes I think I'll go crazy if I'm not allowed out. So, when it gets too bad, I go over to Rose's and we open up a bottle and let rip a bit.

When I was younger, I used to think wine was for middle-aged yuppie has-beens like my mum and her college pals.



But maybe I was just jealous. They all seemed to have been friends for such a long time and had such a good laugh together over the years. I couldn't see any of my friends staying the course somehow. All those whelk-heads and drink-jockeys passed the time alright, but somehow you knew there wasn't anything permanent there. They'd pass on into posterity doing what they do, and at the bottom line, if you weren't there they'd find some other sucker to loaf around with, and it would all be exactly the SAME only you wouldn't be there to know.

Now me and Rose are more like Mum's lot. We talk. I mean really talk. She has two kids. Can you imagine, the only two children in this pensioners' paradise? They think it was made for them. Nine hundred grandmothers and just them to be spoiled. So we talk, with interruptions (juice, mummy, more juice!) and we plan what we will do when Cal and Dan get out of here. "We're going to Italy," says Rose. That's Rose's favourite fantasy. She thinks she has Italian ancestry just because her aunt was an opera singer. So, in between changing nappies and cleaning up after the kids she learns Italian from a twenty-year old Linguaphone tape and a presentation disc of the Barber of Seville. Over the Italian plonk she waxes lyrical about the subjunctive while the kids potty-train their dolls and I plot my progress on the allergy front.

"I think your doctor's having you on about this masked what-not," Rose said when I told her about the wine. "It'll be that stuff they put in the water that's doing it. You take my word for it." Like most of the workers, Rose orders all her water from Bubblestone. She swears by a particular brand, 'Teddy Morter's Lucky Water' which she's been drinking since she was a kid. Each bottle has a lucky number on it, and if your number comes up you win a free trip to Teddy World in California. I think Rose is still hoping she'll win.

When I told Cal I was giving up wine for a month he was really pleased. He likes to pretend that I drink too much. On Friday nights when we go round to Danny and Rose's, or Viv's, for a drink, he always starts making comments if I drink more than two glasses. It starts off as jokes about my alcoholic tendencies, then quickly turns into not so veiled abuse. And all the time he's hitting the whisky like there's no tomorrow. Talk about double standards. Still, you can't blame him really; I have a murderous line in put-downs when I'm drunk.

The first time I ever got drunk was at my brother's eighteenth birthday party. I was sixteen at the time and a bit of a headcase. I helped myself to just about everything going, including my brother's best mate, had a riotous time,

danced round the garden in my underwear with my Dad bellowing at me at the top of his lungs, then passed out under the apple tree. I learnt my lesson though, four years later, when I fell into the canal, blind drunk, and nearly drowned. My mum came to visit me in hospital. "Why do you do it, Maria?" she asked. That's when I first noticed the grey in her hair. "It's my life," I told her. My brother was already a junior electronic broker by then, but I could never settle down to any job. "You can always go to your Gran's," my mum said. But I wouldn't. I didn't want to see what was happening to the lake: the cracked mud where there had once been water, the houses stranded on an empty lakeside, drying out and dying; the yachts all gone. I didn't want to see it and I didn't want to join my Gran in fighting a lost

cause. "She should just accept it," I told my mum. "She should just move somewhere else." The young are cruel. "She's old herself now," I insisted. "She should know that nice warm homes for thousands of senior citizens are much more important than one stupid lake. She should know that."

I said it, but I didn't mean it. I didn't know what I meant, only that I wanted things to be the way they were before in that special place where I'd left my childhood.

PICKLED ONIONS

"I'm not getting any better," I told the doctor today. Cal's been taunting me about the waste of money, and I don't want him guessing I got myself the cheapest medic available and transferred the rest of the funds to another account. "Giving up the wine didn't do me any good," I accused Dr. Gardiner. She looked straight back at me

through gold-tinted glasses and said that was the way it went, and that finding the right thing would only make me feel worse. Thanks a billion, I thought. Like all these cheapo medics, she's trying to sell me the line that I have to suffer in order to get better just because she doesn't know how to help me. She's even trying to convince me that what I have is more like an addiction than an allergy. The symptoms double as you withdraw from the offending substance, but if you resist long enough then you'll be perfectly alright. Always assuming you live that long.

Still, I have a good idea of exactly what to give up next. Pickled onions, my dears. I've often thought I must be addicted to them. Sometimes I buy a whole jar and keep



eating them till they're all gone. Sometimes I sneak into the kitchen at night when I can't sleep and scoff half a dozen before I can stop myself. Then I have to go to the bathroom and scrub my teeth so that Cal can't smell the pickle on my breath. Every time I do it I feel terribly guilty. I can't even say why I do it. I mean I don't like pickled onions that much. I just do it.

The truly suggestive thing is I never had much to do with the pickled perils until I came to live here. Well, I'd have the occasional one at tea-time, just like anyone else might, but really I could take them or leave them. And mostly I just left them. Even when I first moved here I wasn't that tempted. I was having such an interesting time – I saw Sleeper six times in two weeks, went down the Roxy and waved my arms about doing Jack Nicholson impressions, or I simply mooched around the arcade watching the old men playing at pinball or had my tarot read by one of the hippies. But after a while it seemed to get to me. I felt that if I heard about the bloody

'70s one more time I'd scream, and to be honest, some of my neighbours just aren't quite all there. Half the time they don't listen to you because they're as deaf as posts, the rest of the time they just want to know what the Liberal Party's doing or why they can't get Real Ale any more. It's enough to drive anyone crazy, that and Cal nagging at me to do some work, as if I was in a fit state to do anything. So I just go down to the machines, when I'm feeling strong enough, lay in my stocks of pickled onions, order the latest fashion video and OD on all the clothes I can't wear any more.

Cal's always getting at me about the pickled onions. The merest sniff of them is enough to provoke a sermon. I used to think that Cal was trying to improve me, but now I'm not so sure. I look at him, slaving away for a pittance, clearing out the mineshafts, re-seeding the slag-heaps, all so that we can fit more old people down here. Sometimes I think he hates them, but all he ever says is he wants to make our country a better place. He will quote you theory, slogans and verse, just like he always did, but I never quite believe him now. Not any more.

I can still remember how fiercely idealistic I thought Calvin was when I first met him. Mind you, he thought I was a bit of a fire-brand too. It was just after my gran died, and me and my mum were up at the cottage, sorting out her things and arranging for the sale. I was really depressed, and one morning I went out for a walk by myself and there he was, dragging a rowing boat across the mud. He stopped, and we looked at each other, I swear, for about a minute.

Then I said: "What are you doing?" though I knew full well. "Measuring the water level," he said. "Why?" I said, standing there, hands on hips, looking all aggressive. "To check if there's enough," he said. "Enough for what?" I said, though I'd known for years where the water from the lake was going. He looked at me and grinned. "For the greening of the slag heaps," he said, almost cheekily, in the words of the current slogan. Then I hit him, and he knocked me down in the mud. He stood over me in a rage, all six feet two of him plus muscles, swearing at me because I was a rich kid who knew nothing about what it was like to grow up in a three bedroom semi with two sets of grandparents to support and no hope of paying off the mortgage.

Eventually he calmed down, picked me up out of the mud and took me home to get cleaned up. Even then he wouldn't apologise, but I didn't mind. For the first time ever, I thought I could see some sense in what was happening to me and my world. We made friends over a drink in the next

village, and he told me all about his converted slag-heaps and mine-shafts. I won't say I was convinced straight away, but when he took me around the new homes, and I saw how clean and carefully organised it all was, and how happy the old people seemed, I began to understand Cal's sense of mission. It seemed like fate. At last, I had found something worthwhile to do with my life. Only I hadn't.

And so here I am, living in one of his dream-homes for the independently elderly, and wanting nothing more from life than a plateful of pickled onions. Oh Gran, you'd laugh if you could see me now. You'd really laugh.

CHOCOLATE ORANGE FUDGECAKE TOPPED WITH CHERRIES AND CREAM.

No, that's not what I'm allergic to, that's what I'm eating right now. It's one of those huge family-sized ones you can get for dinner parties or picnics, and I'm eating it all, every

single slice of it, and I don't care.

Cal's left me. Yes, that's right – he's gone. Waltzed off with another woman, with that hazel-eyed bitch Vivienne Anderson he's been eyeing up for months.

I can't believe it, there I was waiting up for him, ready to confront him with the news that I knew what was wrong with me, that there was no such thing as a masked allergy, and I was reacting to an overdose of aluminium some activist group had put in the lake several months ago. Which surely he must have known about. But before I could say anything,

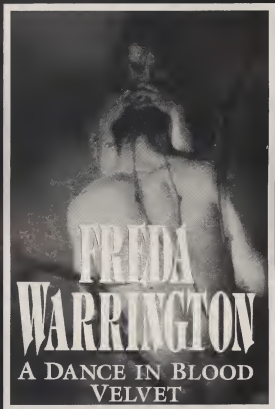


Cal informed me that he and Viv were going off to start work on a new complex over in the Welsh valleys. Only this time he's going to have a cut of the profits. And he's very sorry he can't take me, but I'm no use to him, and he's fed up with all my moaning and groaning over imaginary ailments and my faddy diets and the amount I spend on videos and the way I'm always cheating him of his money. Yes, he said that. He said I should go back to my mother, and let her support me, since that's all my family are good for, and that he'd always known it would be a mistake marrying one of my sort anyway. Viv's different, he said. She's from a good solid working background, with none of my fancy habits. I had to laugh - the only thing solid about Viv is her backside. So anyway, Cal takes all his things out of the cupboards and wardrobes, puts them in a suitcase and walks out. Finito. All over. I just couldn't believe it. It took me half an hour to start to cry, and then I cried all night.

When I finally got to sleep, I dreamed I was back at Gran's cottage. I was sitting on the swing and my gran was pushing me. "Don't ever give up on things, love," she said. "Whatever anyone tells you, you hold on to them." I looked round and saw she was wearing glasses like the doctor's only bigger and more glittery, so that they covered her face like a mask. "If you need something, there's always a reason for it," she said, "even if you can't see it at the time. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise." I won't, gran, I tried to tell her. I won't. But I knew it was a lie. Even in the dream I knew I wouldn't be able to hang on to the lake, and I wouldn't be able to hang on to Cal. I would lose my way, and leave the best part of myself sitting on that swing, soaring out towards the mountains, wanting it all. Not knowing that it was supposed to be bad for me.



**A seductive, dark
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best of Anne Rice**



23

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BRIAN STABLEFORD

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MACMILLAN

As ever, this page has "NO Nudity, Profanity, Overt Sex or Violence", a declaration which on David Garnett's advice I pinched from the American *Offworld: The All-New Illustrated Magazine of SF and Fantasy*. As Garnett found himself thinking: "Hey! A magazine without nudity, profanity, sex, violence. Must buy it!"

DOWN IN THE BLACK GANG

John Brunner bewails losing three months of creative time to the beta-blocker drug *linderal* (taken in fear of a possible stroke) – but was able to finish a beta-blocked article within days of quitting. The article happened to be about how sf drugs work as intended, while real-world ones don't...

John Clute, fabled vocabulary master, read an article submitted for the Friends of Foundation Newsletter and was angrily heard to say: "What does this word mean?" *Dumbfounded Editor*: "I'll look it up in my dictionary..."

Ellen Datlow is to be brutally censored, sort of: her "sexual horror" anthology *Little Deaths* will appear at full length in its Millennium edition over here, but is being cut by some 70,000 words for the tender sensibilities of the US paperback market. Officially, "space considerations" are to blame.

Patricia Fanthorpe, wife and agent of the almost equally famous Robert Lionel Fanthorpe, announced his coming attempt on Guy N. Smith's alleged "world record for a 24-hour marathon write-in" of 16,000 words. This sounds oddly low... besides RLF's own legendary stints, didn't Barry Malzberg once write a 60,000 word novel in 16 hours? (John Brunner once bashed out 18,000 words of his *Black is the Colour* between getting up and going to bed.) I wait again.

David Garnett met the Bowdler Police when *SF Age* published his short "Sherlock the Barbarian". "There was NO nudity, profanity, overt sex or violence. Well, not much. But the word 'shit' was changed to 'dung'." Context! We need context! If, for example, the resulting phrase was "Oh, dung," she hissed sibilantly...

William Gibson flogged his latest novel *Idoru* for \$850,000 – the noise you hear is envious whimpering from the massed SF and Fantasy Writers of America.

John Gullidge of the horror film magazine *Samhain* (see past columns) was driven from home into rented accommodation by further newspaper hounding, notably from the *Exeter Express & Echo*. "I'm now convinced it's a personal thing with the E&E," he writes. "Their story [25 June] carried the headline HORROR MAG MAN 'MUST GO' while the *Western Morning News* ran the

Ansible LINK

same story with the headline MAGAZINE EDITOR CAN STAY WITH PLAYGROUP! The E&E rang for a quote earlier in the week and I read out a three paragraph statement explaining a number of the errors that had appeared in their previous stories but they chose not to use it. The power of the press is a frightening thing and they have absolutely no regard for the damage they cause."

How to do journalism:

- raise concerned doubts about innocent playgroup kids in the merciless hands of a horror (ugh!) fan;
- if any parent falls for that and withdraws their child, the mere fact justifies a more alarmist story about the groundswell against this wicked horrorophile;
- now publish an editorial ostensibly supporting your chosen target yet full of inaccurate smears ("...John Gullidge has enthusiasms that many find distasteful. But not illegal / Mr Gullidge's magazine caters for those who share his interest in films like *Driller Killer* or *I Spit On Your Grave*." – E&E, 30 March 94);
- return to (b) and repeat the cycle until your subject leaves town;
- look around, perhaps, for someone else to work with a minority hobby...

Patrick Nielsen Hayden, almost-famous US editor at Tor Books, reports a tiny problem with the American paperback of Nancy Kress's *Beggars in Spain*: the ornate cover type appears to read *Beggars In Spam*. "Of course, I speak as an employee of the company which, through the magic of Excessive Decorative Title Type, once managed to publish Greg Bear's blockbuster novel *The Forge of God*."

Anne McCaffrey was accosted at a signing session by a fan wanting to know when any Pern novel would offer some throbbing romance between *male* dragonriders. She: "I have a lot of younger readers and I must be careful what I write."

Terry Pratchett reports bemusement from his tour Down Under: "In one shop I had a can of Fosters, I think it was, and chucked the can away. At the end of the signing I was shyly presented with the retrieved can by a blushing fan and asked to sign it" – so now perhaps you can see why my new address is 'somewhere in Wiltshire'.

Christopher Priest's *The Book on the Edge of Forever* (formerly known as *The Last Delusional Visions*), his homage to Harlan Ellison's longest-running project *The Last Dangerous Visions*, finally appeared as a US trade paperback despite certain legal threats. Soon afterwards Ellison, foe to censors and champion of free speech, was publicly stating that he'd killed the book by litigating its distributors into submission – while publishers Fantagraphics Books claimed that their two largest distribution outlets were unintimidated, and sales were good.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Not A Lot Of People Know That.

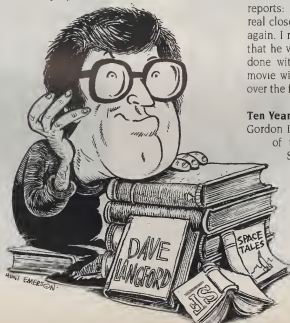
Knowledge master Ian Watson reveals that the current Ambassador Extraordinary & Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Slovenia to the Court of St James is a former science fiction fan, Matjaž Sinkovec... Er, thanks, Ian.

Trek Corner.

Aficionados of stage magic are said to chorle over the 60s *Star Trek* episode "A Piece of the Action" wherein William Shatner tries the legendary Fizbin drop (a "secret" magician's move difficult enough that grown men have broken their wrists practising) and muffs it. Reputably this bit was cut from repeat broadcasts, though remaining in some videos. Now an anonymous spy reports: "Watch the new *Star Trek* movie real close. Shatner is going to try the drop again. I read in a magicians-only magazine that he vowed to his friends that it will be done with one take and included in the movie with no cuts. I guess he's still sore over the fiasco in the original series..."

Ten Years Ago.

Gordon Dickson was the acclaimed winner of the Folio Society's "Worst First Sentence" contest, for the opening of his sf epic *Naked to the Stars*. "The voice, speaking out of the ancient blackness of the night on the third planet of Arcturus – under an alien tree, bent and crippled by the remorseless wind – paused, and cleared its throat: 'Ahem', it said. 'Gentlemen...'"



HIGH NOON



Vurt is a novel by Jeff Noon. It came out of nowhere, a first novel from an independent publisher called Ringpull; got some good and some indifferent reviews; and then won the Arthur C. Clarke Award. Now it's going to make Pan Books pots of money.

It's a slow burn. At first, Vurt feels familiar. It feels like a Philip K Dick drug novel filtered through a post cyberpunk sieve, a Gibson rewrite of *Flow My Tears with a New Order* (no make that Joy Division) soundtrack. The first chapter is only OK – a local posse called the Stash Riders comes unstuck buying drugs (or something like) in Manchester. In the back of the van, there is something tentacled, nicknamed The-Thing-from-Outter-Space. The Thing is friendly, but if you eat it, you get high. It's friendly, but there is a market for its flesh.

Plot hook. The Thing is from an invented universe. You take something out of it, you have to leave something behind. In this case, it was the hero's beloved sister who got trapped. The hero, a writer-ish sort of guy called Scribble, needs to get back with the Thing to make the trade. Then the Thing disappears, to be devoured. Cue

for fast-paced, complex plotting whose skill begins, chapter by chapter, to impress. Deeply.

And chapter by chapter, you begin to see this new world, so like our own, but meaner, brighter and weirder. You take these feathers, see, and you put them in your mouth (or if you're really into it, up your arse) and you go into another reality. Not a virtual reality, not a hallucination, more perhaps like a spirit world. In some way, people have been able to invent other universes. This knowledge-made-flesh is independent. It's invasive. You enter the Vurt, but the Vurt enters you and you are no longer purely human.

In the future there will be famous DJs who are half dog. They call you "sir" and shit on the carpet. There are shadowcops that are half-Vurt. Different realities will cross-breed. Mongrelization indeed. Except that the more compromised, and re-comprised you are, the stronger you get.

It gradually dawns as you read Vurt, that this is one of sf's most exciting universes. It is the perfect sprung metaphor for what is happening to information, right there in Manchester or whatever rundown, decaying ex-suburb we happen to inhabit. Knowledge

Jeff Noon
interviewed by
Geoff Ryman



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is no longer tied to human beings. It is independent and independently mutating. Vurt feels dangerous, sexy, and as if it still has a whole lot more to tell.

So who the hell is Jeff Noon?

I was born in outskirts of Manchester, place called called Droylsden, which is a bit of a graveyard really. It's not the sort of place you'd choose if you wanted to be creative, but set against that, you do stand out. Maybe as a target. I moved into south Manchester. There's a street there called the Oxford Road which is mentioned a few times in *Vurt*. And all these villages like Rusholme and Hulme full of these massive concrete blocks built in the 60s for families. Totally ill-suited for family use. The families all moved out, and the students moved in. And then a lot of the students when they finished college stayed there. They turn into Crusties and Goths and they hang out and some of them get into the Peace Convoy in their big trucks and done-up ambulances. They have their own arts groups as well, these Crusties, and when they were knocking Hulme down, they had a big party to celebrate – they were driving the cars off the roofs on fire. Hey let's go out with a bang.

I used to paint, I studied painting and all that, I've been in bands, I used to do my own one-man stand up comedy in pubs in Ashton. At one point in 1984, I thought: right I'm going to be a writer and that's it. Everything to one side, I'm going to write plays. I had lots of luck with my first play called *Woundings*, which won a prize in the Royal Exchange Competition, and I was writer in residence there for 18 months and had a great time. Then I had a winterland period of my life when I couldn't actually get a second play finished or put on. Second album syndrome. *Vurt* started with a play I was writing, called *The Torture Garden* based on this fantastic novel by Octave Mirbeau, a 19th-century anarchist, bit of a Marquis de Sade. I always wanted to do it as a play, but I could never work out just how. Then by fortuitous

circumstance I was reading a very short article by William Gibson – thought I'd get his name in early! – which was an introduction to a technical book about cyberspace. In it he said that one of his characters had gone off to do a virtual reality game called *The Torture Garden*. I thought: this is it, of course, it's a virtual game.

I started the play. Then Steve, my publisher, came along and said, 'I'm starting my own publishing company.' Steve has known me for years on the Manchester fringe-theatre scene, and he said, 'do you have a novel?'



'I gave the book to Steve a chapter or two at a time. I do have this strange relationship with an editor. I choose a person and I do absolutely everything they say. Steve couldn't believe it, because he's used to writers who won't change a line. I'll say, yeah, I'll cut that line out. This came from my painting. I had a very good teacher when I did A level who taught me not to be precious about any single part of your painting, and that stuck with me ever since. Taking apart different lines or turning characters this way and that doesn't actually change the whole thing that much.'

'In my mind *Vurt* was about VR, but I wanted to take it beyond technology, I wanted to take it to the point that it had become such a part of society that they no longer knew what it was. Its origins were hidden a kind of myth, a kind of magic.'

'I wrote it just by improvising, which is something I never do with a play. I just got these four or five characters up and running from the first page in a dangerous situation. I know that when I started *Vurt*, I thought: this is cyberpunk. But by the second chapter it started to change. When you read the novel hopefully you will see it changing, finding its own voice. I quite like that idea.'

'The second chapter became this incredible journey, just getting the Thing up a staircase without anybody seeing them. It's in the dark with these light switches that the landlord has turned to the lowest possible value so they keep switching off. On the stairs are poisonous dreamsnakes that have escaped from the *Vurt*. The character Beetle kills one of the snakes and says, 'I cut that fucker off. He cuts the head off and wears it on his lapel. That line really settled the character of Beetle for me.'

'People also react emotionally to the hair cutting scene. There are two Crusties who are lovers and their hair has grown together, the locks have become one. When Suze the girl is shot and killed, Scribble has to cut the droidlocks to separate them.'

'God knows where the feathers came from. Thank God they did, because they are another strong image people pick up on. I mean in the early scenes I had people taking tablets or sticking syringes in and I thought, what the hell is going on here? And I suddenly thought: feathers! They tickle their throats with the back of the feathers.'

'The idea of the most dangerous Vurt, Curious Yellow, came in a dream. I'd been talking about it all through the book and I didn't have a clue what it was. I was getting very worried about it, and then in the middle of the after-



noon, I was very tired, so I just went to sleep. I woke up three times with my Dad coming after me. I realized that's what Curious Yellow is - it's the past only the worst past, the worst possible version of the past, and you can't escape it, you can't get out of it until you cope with it, and if you do cope with it you live. If you don't you die

"There's very few people alive who know how the Vurt actually works, and the character Miss Hobart is one of them, and so is the Game Cat. And the hero Scribble's story, if I ever carry on with him, will be the story of how he gets that knowledge. The interesting thing about Vurt for me is that I don't know how it works, and most of the characters don't either, but they all have their own ideas about it, depending on their personalities. Some people think it's just a shared dream and that's it. And other people think it's a kind of religion. Miss Hobart's a head, like a shaman, leading the tribe into a spirit world, and she controls the exchange


mechanism between the worlds.

"You learn that in the last few pages. In the American edition the last few pages have been taken out to leave it more open, which means I'm quite happy to change it. By the end, the book focused on Scribble's dysfunctional family. My American editor felt to jump to something more mystical was a bit jarring."

"Living in Manchester, all sorts of things hit you. It's a small city, it's very self contained, all the news hits you. I was living in Whalley Range when I wrote Vurt, which is the red-light district. I was threatened by a kid with a gun. He said, 'Turn around.' I turned around, saw he had a gun, and turned back around and walked away from him. We got broken into five times. The book is based on Manchester, the streets there, the atmosphere's the same.

"Manchester is a musical city. It's very easy to make something of your-

self if you are a musician there. It allows music to happen, there's an understructure there. But there haven't been that many writers coming out of Manchester, and that's one of the things that Ringpull are trying to change. Ringpull is like an independent, alternative record label. It's like the late 70s, only in publishing. When the book came out in October 1993, I was working in the Manchester Waterstone's bookshop. Steve said, 'If you're not out of that shop by next March, I'll be very angry.' I left in February. So. He knew."

Pollen, another Vurt novel but "lighter in tone," is already due for publication by Ringpull. A third is being written. The Vurt gestalt is far from finished and it's still breeding ideas. Vurt is harder, faster, and better than most people could tell you. "Bedsit cyberpunk," as someone called it who didn't like it. Yeah. OK. Bedsit cyberpunk. So where do you live? 



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UNLIKELY MEETING

The young lady sat down disconsolately on a mossy log, stared round her at the seemingly endless vista of woodland. Saplings and taller trees grew in clumps, interspersed here and there by the delicacy of silver birch; in the distance, bluebells spread an azure haze. But she was seemingly not to be soothed. "Trees," she muttered. "Nothin' but flamin' trees. Dead waste o' space, I reckon." Her accent was definitely not that of the locals; while the sentiment likewise proclaimed her a city dweller. A good crop of houses, she seemed to be saying, was the finest crop of all.

She put her chin in her hands. Her hair was brown, her eyes an indefinable shade of greeny hazel; she wore jeans, and a scoop-necked jumper in transverse green and orange stripes. She pushed her sandals off, disposed them beside her neatly and rubbed an ankle broodingly. She had walked till her feet were sore; but the wood still seemed endless. Though it had looked small enough from the road; a crown of trees topping a grassy knoll. She had wandered toward it, hoping for a little coolness on this unexpectedly sweltering day. She had found pleasant shade, certainly, but nothing else had gone right, and now she seemed hopelessly lost. "Fine place ter get stuck in," she growled. "You just wait till I see that Rod. I'll brain 'im. If it's possible," she added darkly.

A flash of movement caught her eye. She peered, and clicked her tongue. "Come on," she said. "I won't hurt yer." So she wasn't the only creature left in the world after all; she had seriously started to wonder.

The Siamese cat advanced cautiously, one paw at a time; sniffed at her knee, and seemed reassured. It jumped onto the log beside her, sat down composedly and began to preen its already immaculate fur. Round its neck was a complex collar, hung with fetichuses and bells; tiny tinklings sounded as it moved.

"Well, you're a fine one, ain't yer?" said the young lady thoughtfully. "Where you 'ang out then? House round about somewhere, is there? Don't look like you're roughin' it, that's fer sure."

The cat tensed, staring fixedly at a nearby clump of bushes. The girl followed the direction of its gaze, and her back prickled fractionally. It seemed best to put a bold face on things though. "A'right, come on out," she said. "I can see yer. What we playin' then, cowboys an' Indians?"

A second young lady rose from behind the bushes. She was equally pretty, with big blue eyes and a mane of dark, glossy hair. She wore a bright summer dress, and her feet were bare. The cat ran to

her at once, began to push round her. "Hello," she said. "I'm Anita. I knew there was someone lost; I came to see if I could help. Who are you?"

"The other girl ignored the question. 'Who's lost?' she countered. "I ain't lost. I just walked down from the road..."

"Very well. Try and walk back again. I warn you though, this is a funny old wood."

The prickling increased. It seemed a change of subject was very much in order. "You live round 'ere?" asked the jean-clad young lady casually.

"Not far off. We've got a cottage. I live with my Gran. You may have heard of us."

"Can't say I ave," said the stranger with equal airiness. "But then, I ain't from round these parts. Don't know much about the country." Nor, it seemed, did she wish to; leastways, her tone implied it clearly enough.

Anita compressed her lips. Matters rural had always been closest to her heart, towns an anathema. Typical of a town person to be so dismissive. She momentarily considered doing several things that would focus the other's attention more fully, and decided against them. It wouldn't be fair; besides, there was something about her. She seemed... well, sort of all right. Nice, in an unexpected sort of way. Also there was something at the backs of her eyes; almost as if she knew about things. All sorts of things. And she was certainly pretty, with a really super figure. There was a neatness about her, she decided; it even showed in the way she sat. Shoes on the log beside her, and a little shoulder bag. Privately, Anita had always admired that sort of thing; it was so *feminine* somehow. She herself was always scattering things about; her Gran was for ever going on at her for it. So it was possible there were some good people who lived in towns; even places like London. It was a new thought; she savoured it with care. "Won't you even tell me your name?" she said. "You're not being fair, I told you."

The stranger considered. "It's Kaeti," she said finally. "Spelled with an 'a' and an 'e', like the Germans do."

"That's nice, I like it. Hello, Kaeti. Why on earth spell it like that though? I mean, you're not foreign or anything, are you? You don't sound..." Anita tailed off. The other certainly didn't talk like a Continental; more sort of... well, East End or something. 'Roundhouse' was a word that flitted across her mind. She had never been too sure what was meant by it; but it seemed to fit exactly. She didn't say it though; she really had no wish to give

Keith Roberts

offence. The stranger seemed far too interesting.

Silence fell, in the wood. It threatened to continue. Kaeti broke it, suddenly. "What you do then?" she asked. "You an' your Gran? I mean, fer a livin' an' that?"

"Oh, we're witches," said Anita, settling immediately onto more familiar ground. "We keep really busy; you know, spelling things up an' that. You wouldn't believe it sometimes, it's absolutely non stop. Only Gran's much better than I am. Some of the things she can do, you just wouldn't believe. Still, she's been at it a lot longer than I have. All her life, I suppose I never really thought about it, she's just always sort of been there. I shall have to ask her about it sometime, when she got started an' that. Except, well, it's difficult with Gran, she'd probably just think I was being nosey. You've got to be careful what you say to her sometimes; if you knew her, you'd understand." She rubbed the cat's coat; he fawned and mewed, staring up with his electric-blue eyes. "This is Winjou," she said. "He's my Familiar. Well, one of them, I've got lots. He's great though, he's the best. Some of the others... He always does exactly what I want though; don't you, pet? Most of the time I don't even have to ask. He just sort of knows."

She tailed off again; because Kaeti was staring at her with a certain expression. "Witches?" she said incredulously. "Don't tell me you still believe all that ol' stuff. Broomsticks, an' castin' spells an' that! That's just in kids' books..."

Anita hissed faintly. "You're a fine one to talk," she snapped. "What about that sweater thing you had then, with the tiger on the front? When people got you mad, it woke up and growled; and you know the sort of things that happened then! Are you trying to tell me that wasn't spell-casting?"

"It wasn't as bad as some o' the things you got up to! What about that time you went off under the sea! Wouldn't catch me don't that, fer starters; you know I gets seasick on the Serpentine!"

Anita snorted. "I never died, and got myself buried, and came back as a vampire! An' that was your first story of all! It was horrible! I couldn't sleep for a week, just thinking about it!"

"It wasn't horrible! It was just a new way of lookin' at things! Knocked all that ol' stuff about yan Helsing an' that right on the head! Anyway, what about that poor ol' scarecrow you done in? Bashed 'im all ter bits, just fer tryin' to 'ave a grope!"

"That's a horrible thing to say! It wasn't like that at all! He broke the Witches Rules!"

"Broke your rules, more like," said Kaeti sardonically. "Miss 'igh an' mighty you are, an' no mistake! What was that your Granny used ter call you? 'Aughty young cat', somethin' like that! She was about right!"

"I'm not high and mighty! I'm just an ordinary country girl!"

"Stroll on! That from somebody that goes tearin' about in Time! You took them people back to the Middle Ages, an' left 'em there!"

"It was what they wanted! Anyway, you went back to Roman Britain!"

"What about that other thing then? Went right back through

Time, an' come back where you started! Call that bein' normal?"

"Coming from you, that's rich," said Anita. Her chest had begun to heave a little. "You're worse than a witch, you are. Do you know why? Do you know what you are? You're a science fiction character!"

Kaeti stood up, very deliberately. Her jaw was set, and a red anger-spot glowed on each cheek. "That," she said, "is the worst thing anybody ever called me. I ought to 'ang one on you..." She clenched her fists.

"I wouldn't try it," said Anita. "You'd be sorry rather quickly. Remember, you're in my wood..." Nonetheless she took a quick step backward, out of immediate range. "I'm warning you one last time, Kaeti. There are powers in Foxhanger..." She stopped suddenly, mouth slightly ajar. "Kaeti," she said, "How many times have you read my book?"

Kaeti pushed a wisp of hair back from her forehead. "Dozens," she admitted. Then it dawned on her too. "You've got mine as well!"

"Both of them," said Anita. "They're my treasures. That last one's terrific, I positively lived it all. I laughed so much when you bust that seance thing up, I woke Gran. The things she called me, in the morning... How do you think of them?"

"I don't," said Kaeti frankly. "They just sort of happen, always have. Must be the way I am; somethin' ter do with vibes..."

She started to laugh. "Right pair o' nits we are. Givin' each other real 'ard time, weren't we? Pretendin' we 'adn't recognized each other, the lot. I was goin' ter belt you."

"And I was going to... it doesn't matter though. Kaeti, welcome to Foxhanger!" Anita held her arms out; a moments pause, and her new friend hurried forward. They embraced, enthusiastically; then Anita pushed away. "It's your fault really," she said. "You're so easy to wind up."

Kaeti pushed her hair back again. "Snap," she said laconically.



The two girls scotched side by side on the log. Winjou sat between them, contentedly washing an ear. "This really Foxhanger then?" said Kaeti. "Always wondered what it looked like."

"I think so," Anita didn't seem wholly sure herself. "It's where I've always lived, so I suppose it must be..." It changes," she explained. "All the time. Just sort of alters, you never know from one day to the next. Sometimes it's just a little wood on a hill, you can see Kettering from it. Others though, you can walk for miles. There doesn't seem to be an end to it..."

"I know," said Kaeti. "Found that out fer meself." She reached into her bag, took out a pack of cigarettes, changed her mind when the other wrinkled her nose. She shut the bag again.


"It's all right," said Anita quickly. "I don't mind, honestly. Even tried it myself once. It messed up all sorts of things though."

"Yeah," said Kaeti. "I remember. It don't matter. Never bin much of a smoker reely. Not like that Rod. It's fags, fags all the time with 'im. Tol' 'im the other day, 'e wanted a chimney on top of 'is 'ead. Be 'appy then, 'e would; till 'e thought of somethin' else."

"So why are you here anyway? What are you doing in



KAETI'S ROUND THE TWIST...



Usin' one of her crazy drawings on this ad, for starters. 'That's you, Teen,' she says. 'That's you to the life.' It ain't though. I mean, my hair's never *that* scruffy. She says try lookin' in the mirror though, first thing. Typical...

She reckons we got to celebrate, the new book bein' halfway sold out an' that. An' it's only bin a month or two. Then she starts goin' up the wall. 'I hope they printed enough,' she says. 'Hope nobody don't get left out...' Some folk ain't never suited.

She's still goin' on about us sleepin' together. Just because the flat's only got one flamin' bed. Get us a right bad name she will, afore she's done. If she ain't already.

She reckons I ain't just round the bend, I'm halfway back along the straight. Hark at the pot callin' the kettle black...

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Northamptonshire?"

"Oh, that were Rod again," said Kaeti. "Another of 'is bright ideas. Tourin' 'oliday; supposed ter be anyway. You gotta broaden your outlook, my girl,' 'e says. 'See a bit o' the world. No use bein' stuck in one place all the time; you got no spirit of adventure,' 'e says." She snorted. "Ad all the adventure I want already. Stuck this tent thing in the back o' the car,' 'e did. Only tried it the once though. 'Ad a sort o' cloudburst, in the middle o' the night; woke up, it was like a river goin' through. 'Right,' I says, 'That's enough o' the back ter Nature bit,' I says. 'You can keep yer Nature; I prefers it through glass. It's 'otels fer me, from now on in; or you an me's partin' company, smartish.' So we come on to Ketterin'; we're stayin' at the Royal."

Anita laughed despite herself. After all, she didn't like being cold and wet either; there were limits to everything. "I'd have thought you'd have seen enough of the world anyway, after that last book you did," she said. "For the time being at least. I've never been all that keen on globetrotting myself; I just don't think it's all it's cracked up to be."

"Too right," said Kaeti. "Got settled in nice, we 'ad; only this morning 'e 'as another thought. 'Better 'ave a look at that there Wicksteed Park they keeps goin' on about,' 'e says. 'Seems a pity not to, while we're 'ere.'"

"So, did you?"

Kaeti sniffed again. "Sort of," she said. "Saw all these cars an' charas parked there anyway. Lines of 'em, went fer miles. 'Cor,' I says. 'If that's just the car park, must be 'ell of a place.'"

Anita pulled a face. "I've got news for you," she said. "That's all there is of it. By the time they get all the cars in, you're lucky if there's a bit of grass round the edge you can still walk on." She tickled Winijou under the chin. "It isn't really quite as bad as that; it isn't my sort of scene though. 'So you didn't go in?"

"Never 'ad the chance," said Kaeti. "We were jus' goin' to, only 'e decides 'e's run out o' fags. Gone onto these French things 'e 'as, smell like burnin' jockstraps. 'Pity ter go in without,' he says. 'Odds on we shan't be able ter buy none in there. We'll just nip back into town,' 'e says. 'Won't take more'n a few minutes.' 'You nip where you likes, Rod Ackroyd,' I says. 'I ain't chasin' in circles after flamin' fags,' I says. 'You drop me right 'ere, I'll wait.' I got fed up though. Then I seen the wood, an' thought it looked nice..."

"I'm glad you did," said Anita.

"Me too," said Kaeti promptly. "Wouldn't 'ave met you else. Or Winijou." She picked the Siamese up and hugged him, feeling how lithe and strong he was. "E's marvellous. All the times I've read about him; he's just like in the book. Can't believe it 'ardly."

Anita plucked a grass stem, bit at it thoughtfully. "So Rod really is your boyfriend?" she said. "I mean, as well as in the stories."

"S'pose you could call 'im that," said Kaeti sombrely. "Got a few other names for 'im as well though."

"And are the others just the same too? Toby and Kerry, all the rest?"

"S'pose so. Tobe's a bit of a nut case o' course, always 'as bin. Kerry's great though," said Kaeti enthusiastically. "Never met anybody like her, not in all me life. Great actress as well, when she says things you sort o' believe in 'em. Makes it all come real.

Bit too real in the end. Got ter be like livin' in two times at once, don't think any of us really knew where we were. Or who..."

"I know the feeling," said Anita. "It got like that for me as well. You start out just trying to help; then before you know where you are..."

"Yer up to yer neck in it," said Kaeti. "Like you with that checkout girl; an' me with... oh, Tina, Tennoch, all sorts. All the world's troubles, you got on yer back. You just have to draw the line somewhere, I know I did..."

Anita looked at her sidelong. "It's all right, I know what you mean. I used to sleep around; in the sixties, we thought it was smart. I don't think it was though, not really. You don't get anywhere in the end. It was never your style though, was it? You had companions, but that was all." She smiled. "You know something, Kaeti? You're a very proper person, for all you shout the odds now and then. You always knew where you were going too; I wish I could say the same."

"I dunno about that," said Kaeti. "Chance would've bin a fine thing; mostly felt I was goin' up the wall." She paused. "Ever see any o' your o' mates these days? Sir John Carpenter, all that lot?"

Anita shook her head. "No, he's still in the Far East somewhere. He sent me a card from Bangkok once. It had got these dancers on it, he said they reminded him of me. He was always a right old smoothie though; anyway, my fingers don't turn up at the ends. His brother's still around, farms out Thorpe Manor way. He doesn't change much; but then, he never will. He'll always be Charles..." She looked thoughtful. "You know, we've really got a terrific lot in common. In spite of coming from... well, different times an' that. I was reading about your party the other night, the one you had after your stage thing. When you wished you could go outside, and see it all going on for ever. It was just like the one I had at the end of my book, that everybody came to. We ought to put one on together sometime; that really would be something else..."

"You can say that again," said Kaeti. "All your lot, an' all mine. Don't think we'd either of us get through it though..."

"Oh, I don't know," said Anita. "We lived through most things, one way and another. And we're still here. It would certainly be fun to try..." She jumped up. "I think it's hotter than ever. What I could really use is a long, cool drink. Would you like to come up to the cottage?"

"What cottage?"

"Our cottage, of course!" Anita waved a hand, and Kaeti blinked. A few yards away, a brook – it just had to be the Fynebrook – chuckled pleasantly; beyond, a thatched white cottage sat tranquilly in a little clearing. She was sure the last time she had looked up, the wood had stretched to the horizon.

"You see, London just ain't like people think," said Kaeti. "Not when you gets to know it a bit. I know there's the middle, 'ighrises an' that, but the rest... it's sort of like – well, villages I s'pose, all joined up, they're all different... Lived in a few o' 'em; born in a few as well, in a manner o' speakin'. I know they keeps on knockin' it about, bashed a whole lot o' stuff down, but it's always bin like that, right since it got started. There's still... London's sort o' deep, won't ever change that. All the Mediaevals, in a sort o' way



they're still there. Then there's the Normans an' the Saxons an' the eighteenth century lot, all wigs an' coaches an' highwaymen. And the Romans o' course; only when they come over there was already a town there, nobody knows 'ow old it reely was, nobody ever will. Put their noses right out o' joint; there they were all set ter civilise everythin' an' there's this town, wi' streets, all sorts. You'll have ter come up," she said. "It's reely the only way..."

"I'd like that," said Anita. "I'd like that very much. But only if you showed me around. Would you?" She could feel the excitement welling up already. What she had thought had been right; Kaeti did know about things. The old things, the oldest things of all, the ones that matter most. "Tell me though," she said. "This boyfriend of yours, this Rod. Does he understand, Kaeti? Does he understand the way you do?"

Kaeti nodded. "He's all right," she said. "For all 'e can be a pain when 'e puts 'is mind to it. Only reason I puts up with 'im." She paused. "E's got... I dunno. Got style, somehow. That's why he done that Roman thing so good, in the last book. 'Spect we shall finish up gettin' spliced. Either you got style, or you ain't."

"Like the Carpenters," said her friend. "I know exactly what you mean. You'll be all right, Kaeti. You're going to have a super little girl, too. You'll call her Norma. I was talking to her just now, in the wood."

Kaeti opened her mouth, and closed it again. She supposed it was best to know about these things. Reassuring. Better than frogs and test tubes anyway. Or however they did it these days.

Anita opened the front gate. Hens clucked contentedly round the cottage. "It's great," said Kaeti. "Really great. Dead peaceful. Reckon I could get used to it 'ere."

There was an explosion of squawking. A large, impossibly coloured form had appeared, seemingly from nowhere. Feathers flew in clouds; things erupted from bushes; a duck, honking with terror, took off for foreign parts.

"Vortigern," yelled Anita, "leave them *alone*. How many times do I have to tell you? You've been *fed* twice today already..."

Boowww... Pstttzz...

"Vortigern, for the last time..."

MOOAAWWWW...

Anita made a quick pass in the air. Something like a small fireball appeared, easily visible in the bright sunlight. It hung for a moment, and swooped. A sharp crack, a further explosion of swearing, and where there had been a pink and violet, violently overweight cat, there was a sudden space. The hens settled back to their affairs, puffing out their still-indignant feathers, peace redescended.

"It's all right," said Anita, dusting her hands. "He can't really be hurt. He's like a sort of cartoon character, if I chopped him in bits, they'd only join straight back together again. More's the pity," she added under her breath. She unlatched the cottage door. "Come in," she said. She crossed the kitchen, opened the door of a tall fridge and peered inside circumspectly. "Gran didn't like this at all when I had it put in," she said. "She doesn't go for new-fangled things much, never has. It's useful when one of her spells starts going wrong though; she sticks them inside to cool them down. That's why it's always best to check; you never know what you're

likely to find!" She took out a jug with a pretty, lacy cover. "Lemonade all right? We make our own; it's really very nice."

The two girls sat in the front room, on either side of the big empty hearth. Kaeti stared through the window at the diminutive back garden. Something seemed to be puzzling her. "It's great," she said. "Did you do it all?"

"Most of it," said Anita. "The ponds were hardest, they took ages. No spells of course; it didn't seem right somehow. The barrowloads of stuff I had to cart; I love it now though, I'm glad I bothered. There's frogs and newts, all sorts of things. Oh, and dragonflies of course, some of them are *beauties*. They moved in for themselves, right from the start, I didn't have to send for any of them. It's a proper little colony."

Kaeti nodded. Water trickled between rocks; tall flags stood in clumps, there were lilies, the lot. "It reminds me of another place," she said. "Funny, but it's like I was born there as well. It's all comin' back..."

"Yes," said Anita. "I remember it too. That's why I did this, I got as close to it as I could. It will always be here now." She considered. "I think we were both born there, it's where we really started from. It was a long time ago though."

"S'pose it was," said Kaeti. "On the other 'and though, it don't seem no time at all. Just like yesterday." She sipped. "You're right, this lemonade's great. You really make it yourselves?"

"We certainly do," said Anita. "Best in Northamptonshire. Except Gran reckons it's too sharp. Least, I think she does. 'Ackles a bit,' put what she said; one day I'll find out what that actually means. Put some more ice in, if you like; don't worry, we've got loads. Lot to be said, for this modern living..."

There was a distant rumbling. It rapidly increased in volume. The cottage shook; plates on a dresser buzzed uncomfortably; something burst from beneath the sofa, fled squawking. A final concussion, an explosion of light; and an old lady appeared in the middle of the room. Despite the warmth of the day she wore a long and shapeless black coat; an equally venerable felt hat was perched on her head at a belligerent angle, while her *ensemble* was completed, improbably, by an old floral apron. A black cat with blazing green eyes perched spitting on her shoulder; in one hand she gripped a massive besom, in the other a gnarled walking stick. She waved the stick; lights of various colours weaved and bobbed, trails of sparks zoomed about the room. A final peal of thunder, and the noise subsided by degrees. She flung the broom into the corner and hobbled to a chair, on which she plumped down with every appearance of satisfaction. "Feel better fer that," she announced, to nobody in particular.

"Gran," said Anita, "why do you have to make such a row about everything these days? You never used to; you were always going on at me for it."

"*Himige*," said the old lady. "These days, you gotta 'ave the right *Himige*. Orlright bein' a witch; but if nobody dunt *know*, there ent no *point*. You other know; that young bloke were gooin' on about it enough, that last area meetin' we 'ad..." She eased her position, carefully. "Dunt reckon I'll bother wi' much more on it though; it dunt do me rheumatics no good..."

"It's all right, Kaeti," said Anita. "You can come out; it's only Gran."



Kaeti rose carefully from behind the sofa, and dusted herself down. "Sorry," she said. "But when you bin through a couple o' Blitzes, takin' cover gets ter be 'abit."

The old lady had watched the process with a degree of interest. "Oo's yer friend, gel?" she asked.

"It's Kaeti. You know, from the new book. Kaeti, this is my Gran."

"Pleased to meet yer, Mrs. Thompson," said Kaeti politely.

"Ah, so yore Kaeti," said Granny. "Got a lot to answer for, you 'ave, my gel." She wagged a thumb. "Kep' me awake 'arf the night she did, cacklin' an gooin' on. That yore bloke chargin' about outside? Doin' 'is nut, 'e is; reckoned you bin kidnapped, or somethin'."

Kaeti clapped a hand to her mouth. "That'll be Rod, I forgot all about him. I'd better go an' tell 'im I'm all right."

Granny sniffed. "E wunt 'urt. Wunt do 'im no 'arm ter fret a bit."

"But he'll be worried! No telling what he might do."

"Yes," said Anita. "An' he's nice too, Kaeti was telling me."

"We were talkin' about all sorts. The garden, everything..."

"Blokes mostly, I esspect," said Granny with some asperity.

"Orl the same, you are. Minds never orf it. In my young days..."

"I bet you were just the same," said her granddaughter. "Or worse..."

"You keep a civil tongue in yer 'ead, my gel. No respect fer yer elders an' betters, yore orl alike. Dunt know wot the world's comin' 'to, straight I dunt..."

"But I'm not like that Gran! You know I'm not!"

"Me neither," said Kaeti stoutly. "Dead old-fashioned we are, where I comes from. Conservative, that's what we are; with a small 'c' o' course," she added, in case she had been misunderstood.

"Orlright, keep yer 'air on," said Granny. She stared at both girls appraisingly. "You ent bad kids, I'll say that for yer. Seen wuss, anyway. Though *weer*, I kent 'ardly remember..." She adjusted the spectacles that as ever perched askew on the tip of her nose.

Anita dashed into the kitchen, returned balancing a tray. On it were glasses, and a bottle. "Gran's paid a *compliment*," she said. "We've just got to celebrate. Let's have a toast."

"What to?"

"Jist get *on* with it," snapped Granny: "Fed up, orl this *javin'*..."

Kaeti raised a glass. "To Limited Editions," she said. "After all, if it wadn't fer them we'd neither of us be 'ere."

"An' Nexus?"

"Yeah," said Kaeti. "S'pose so."

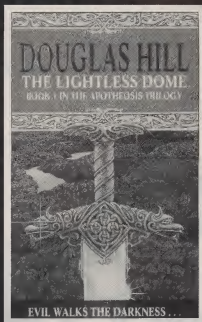


Keith Roberts is author of the classic science fiction novels *The Furies* and *Pavane*. He has published many volumes of shorter stories, the latest of which, *Kaeti on Tour*, is available as a hardback from The Sirius Book Company, PO Box 122, Feltham, Middlesex, England

The early collection *Anita* was published in 1970 and subsequently has become a rare and much sought-after book. It has, however, recently been republished in hardback, with additional stories, by Owlswick Press, PO Box 8243, Philadelphia PA 19101-8243, USA

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"Morning," said the cafe owner. "Glad you could finally make it over."

"I'm sorry," said the customer, holding out his hand, "but I've been busy. How long have you been open?"

"About two weeks."

"Where'd you get the name?"

"Ah, that's the interesting part. See, this cafe is a little different. He looked around, leaned forward, whispered. "Here, every day, two patrons, never the same ones, come in – wait, I don't want to spoil it. Come with me." He walked to the back, the customer following him, past the people sitting at little tables, half-reading their newspapers, and looking up hopefully at each new person that walked by. "In the back here." He opened the glass and wood door and pointed to a table under the wooden trellis. Two men sat facing each other, staring down at a chess board, each with his tongue pushed against his own cheek, each pulling his own chin with his hand.

"Identical twins," said the customer.

"Identical, yes," said the cafe owner. "But not twins."

"What do you mean?"

"They're the same person – two identical beings."

"How could that be?"

"It just is," said the cafe owner, wagging his finger. "Magic."

CAFÉ DUO

by William L. Ramseyer

Suddenly one of the men stood up, shook his head, his flat straight hair swinging out in an arc, and then coming back to rest on his shoulder. "That's it," he yelled. "That's really it." The other stood up and made the same gesture with his hair.

"You cheat," said the first.

"You're just a poor loser," said the second.

"Thirteen games in a row," said the first. He kicked the chess board, scattering the fallen armies. The second man grabbed him. He swung out his arm, breaking the grip, and pulled out a knife. The second man pushed him over a chair and ran out.

"Well," said the cafe owner to the customer, "what do you think?"

"Depressing. Even identical people can't get along."

"It all depends on how you look at it," said the owner, shrugging. "To me it shows that people will do anything, even kill themselves, to be free."



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MUTANT POPCORN

Nick Lowe

It would be primitive to judge *The Flintstones* as a film, when the package as a whole is the most complex example yet of that highest of *fin de millénium* art-forms, the engineered cross-platform phenomenon – in this case, spanning not just the whole media and marketing spectrum but a full generation of cultural memory and distance. This capstone of the Spielberg dino trilogy (a UK release for the year-old *We're Back* has been postponed again) is the most ambitious essay yet in bringing lost worlds of extinct creatures to throbbing 3D theme-park life, reanimating not just the time-frozen Ötzi of Bedrock itself but the whole cultural landscape they used to farm. And none of your *Jurassic* hand-wringing ambivalence about the enterprise of exploitation here. The film itself already looks like a studio ride, with its village set, manmade-coloured décor of obviously plastic rocks, and abundance of cute mechanical attractions centring on an irresistible fun vehicle that seats a family of four. The end titles (sidisplittingly packed with credits for "Prehistoric Foley Recordists") play to a megamix of the entire soundtrack album, which in the suggestive state you're left in at the end of the tour really doesn't sound bad, until you wake up and you find you've bought an album full of things like "Anarchy in the UK" performed with custom lyrics ("I am a Fred Flintstone", &c.) by someone called Green Jelly. And as you leave the viewing space itself, you pass into a larger retailing environment full of impossibly intricate purchasing invitations ("Buy one of these Flintstones cups or tubs and you can get a Bamm-Bamm club for only £1.25. Subject to availability. Bamm-Bamm clubs sold separately for £2.50."). If you actually unpack the colourful cartoon character covered box and shake

out all the scrummy rock-shaped sugar cereal, you'll find at the bottom of all this yabba-dabba-dumptions retailing opportunity hides a small plastic envelope with a movie inside. But those 93 minutes of screen time are a tiny fragment of what amounts to a complete media environment built to last a whole summer.

This is just as well since, purely as a piece of film-making, there isn't a lot to be said for *The Flintstones* itself. Story and dialogue are astonishingly poor, none of the cast are terribly good, and even the mis-conceived oranges are rather imperfectly wrangled. Moranis, in particular, is ill-cast and charmless, and John Goodman's uneasy presence and performance at the centre looks like stubborn package thinking. (He's a *big guy*, right? So he can give a *big performance* – "larger than life", if you will!) But the truth is, Goodman's playing – as opposed to the characters he plays – is at its best extraordinarily nuanced and subtle, and these broad comic roles are woefully ill-fitting.) There's certainly a lot of money up on the screen, and plenty of technical ingenuity, while the sheer visual

density of gags per pixel must be easily the highest in movie history, presumably thanks to the innovative policy of by-the-barrel joke purchase from those famous 32 "writers" – most of whom seem in fact to have been kept well away from the actual story and script, and instead been strapped into a conferencing machine and milked till their digs hurt for scatter gags and throw-aways. But this doesn't, sad to say, do anything to bump up the quota of jokes that are actually funny, it just means you have to see the movie an inordinate number of times on a full-sized screen to excavate all the material. Commercially, at least, this was evidently quite sharp planning.

But what partly redeems the larger *Flintstones* event as a surprisingly sophisticated and even provocative creation is the intricate play of anachronism in the repackaging process itself. In 1962, the *Flintstones* were a blissfully clean-lined, simple concept, beginning of human history ("The Stone Age") repainted to look like its culmination (postwar middle America). But by 1994, the dots of ink that used to mark the start and end of hominid civilization have spread and separated in a riot of cultural chromatography. For one thing, the Stone Age barely exists any more in the popular imagination, replaced by a much more complex and curious panorama of new-age fantasies about Cro-Magnons having more orgasms than Neanderthals; while the dinosaurs have split off from the hominid tree and evolved their own show. Remember that in the *Flintstones*' day popular notions of prehistory were still sufficiently vague that, as late as 1966, it was still permissible for a notionally humourless movie like *One Million Years BC* to show, without irony or apology, humans and

dinosauria roaming the earth side-by-side. In our own time, this is (rather regrettably) perceived to be merely silly, so that *The*

Goodman's playing... is at its best extraordinarily nuanced and subtle



35

Flintstones already becomes a fantasy about a fantasy, a nostalgic return to the conceptual frame we inhabited in the childhood of our world.

But still more significant is the distance that's opened up between the 90s and the 60s: a difference if anything more profound than the one closed by Hanna-Barbera's comedic collapse of Olduvai and suburbia. Fred's modern stone-age family is historically stranded at least as much by its modernism as by its ignorance of metallurgy - in a world where, for instance, the trimming edge of technology is mechanical rather than electronic, and thus the whole gag about animal-powered substitutes for electrical gadgets still just about workable. Even on this purely material level, the *Flintstones* movie has a weirdly retro feel: there are weak attempts to update the technological culturescape with stone-age cash dispensers and Dictabirds, but conspicuous by their invisibility are any stone-age anticipations of desktop PCs, compact discs (Fred's party shimmies to strictly vinylite analogue), or games consoles, while early-hominid broadcast media remain finger-crossingly unexplained. But more centrally, the whole underpinning gag of the Bedrock scenario - its comic fantasy of a pretechnological consumer society - has become a much darker and more dangerous joke in the 90s, where images of affluence and overconsumption are no longer as innocent as they seemed in the 60s, and the gap between developed and preindustrial worlds is a lot less easy to feel mythical about. Casting Goodman, with his personal dowry of overeating jokes, only compounds the unease.

For the 1994 version has to deal with the painful retrospective truth that suburban middle America in 1962 really was the zenith of human happiness. *The Flintstones* bleats with nostalgia for a more comfortable age of open-ended industrial growth, with job security and high living standards for blue-collar families, when history and progress were a single-lane highway with no backing up from the primitive dark to the gleaming modern; when men bonded by bowling, beer, and sprouting masonic headgear, and it was ok to make jokes about the mother-in-law, when environment and resources were the rightful playground of manufacturing industry, apartheid innocently accepted as a fact of life ("the Lodge," Fred reassures Wilma, "no longer accepts Neanderthals") and law enforcement was the prerogative of happy-go-lucky lynch mobs. The one shrewd thing about the movie's otherwise imbecilic narrative line is the way it plays on this utopianizing of the years between Korea and Vietnam, with Fred and Barney sucked briefly into a nightmarish 90s plotscape of corporate intrigue, financial fraud, mass unemployment and homelessness, where the one has to abjure the temptation of interracial canoodling and the other despairingly howls "It's finally happened.

I've become my father!" (mass outbreak of fingers down throat) - before the prelapsarian world is made new and incorruptible at the close and everyone piles off to the drive-in for a gay old time. "I just want my old life back," sighs Fred at the end, refusing the proffered ticket to the postmodern, post-stone-age world. "I was always the richest guy in the world; I just didn't know it." And he's right, the age of the *Flintstones* was the happy childhood of our world. Bliss was it in that dawn of man to be alive; but to be a *Flintstone* was very heaven.

At the other end of the scale, the summer's other period remake, Christopher Guest's *Attack of the 50ft Woman*, puts its battered 1958 model through a kind of reverse of the *Flintstones* process, in which the inadvertent postmodernism of the original's self-deconstructive technical inept-

Still defiant
in their refusal to
co-operate with the
rules of sensible cinema

tude and erratically quasi-feminist narrative is tamed and civilized by repackaging as an innocuous HBO comedy. What was unconscious and subtextual - the allegory of female alienation and personal growth, the deadpan mix of exploitation, horror and unintended laughs - is now self-conscious and all over the script, as dim Daryl Hannah, trapped in a loveless life between scheming capitalist father and bimbo-banking husband, finds herself abducted and colossal empowered by crusading aliens, only to discover that the smalltown world around her is not ready for Ms Gulliver's enlarged perspectives. Pacing is glacial, humour dismal, the support cast lay it on with the trowel, and the typically bland, watery made-for-cable script - with its rigid exclusion of any but the mildest profanity, eroticism, violence, and conceptual or emotional daring - looks even more unhappy when blown up to colossal size. Even the effects are scarcely more persuasive by 1994 standards than the original's were by 1958's, with dodgy composites, badly-mimed force-fields, cut-away transformation scenes, and the cheapest UFO encounter in years ("OK, everyone stare up into the blue-white light, and let's see those mouths hang wider, wider, and... action!"). Yet it still fumbles awkwardly with its theme, over-ironizing it with not one but two concentric prologue frames, uncertain (rather than just ambivalent) in its empathy for the heroine's plight before and after her upscaling, and letting her male abusers off far too lightly in the silly new coda. "I always thought men like you vanished with

the dinosaur and the woolly mammoth," says the ever-so-90s lady therapist at once point, apparently possessed by the bizarre illusion that the dinosaur and woolly mammoth have vanished. Now there's a gal who needs to get out more.

After such a miserable platter of crunchy green bunny-fod, it's a junkster's treat to turn to a huge, greasy slab of non-nonsense nonsense like Stuart Gordon's *Fortress*, whose own gleeful miscegenation of history and fantasy aims at nothing more than the transient gratification of the most brutish and unevolved cinematic appetites. *Fortress* is another in the Queensland Film Commission's series of cognitively estranging meditations on a proud nation's birth, in which mid-budget stars find themselves transported to a remote convict colony populated by full-blooded character actors and a complete arsenal of futurized prison-movie situations. But where *No Escape* was thoughtful, worthy and phenomenally dull, *Fortress* is gloriously inane, completely worthless, and more fun than a nosebag of Space Dust. It's particularly refreshing to see 80s B-master Gordon, and fellow escapees Jeffrey Combs and Tom Towles, survive with their budgets raised but their sense of the ridiculous intact, and still defiant in their refusal to cooperate with the rules of sensible cinema. If you can put up with the wearisome Christopher Lambert (the running gag about the Combs' character's myopia seems almost unintentional) and the bludgeon-sharp social comment about the criminalization of the family, rewards include some joyous mugging from Combs and chums, top notch penological and technological absurdities ("these things here are micros, and this is a macro"), a particularly overripe future-torture scene, and any number of sublimely daft set pieces, culminating in a cuticle-chomping race against time as the prison surgeon spends what appears to be several minutes approaching Mrs L's pregnant belly with a junior chainsaw. Plot, script and exposition have the robust functionality of a flaked handaxe [John Brennick, the most decorated captain in the history of the Black Berets, yet you quit in disgrace - lost a platoon, I believe], and the whole dystopian vision of the future belongs to a poignantly past, more innocent age when the worst we could envisage was totalitarian superstates with hi-tech enforcement and a statutory ban on fun. Since the real future, like the real past, promises to be infinitely more complex and nasty than anything we choose to imagine, you can see why escape plots hold such enduring attraction. But in real history, as the helpful tourguide w/o informs Capt. Brennick on his induction, "escape is impossible. Everything here is the property of the Men-Tel Corporation, including you." And before you get any clever ideas, those Bamm-Bamm clubs are just an inflatable toy. Lights out in ten.

Nick Lowe

...and Seven Copies of Snow White Meets Godzilla...

It was one of those loooooong Saturday evenings at the bar of my Fast Meon local, and the *Old Peculiars* (as us 'locals' call ourselves) were trying hard to remember who it was who had sung the theme to 'Howard's Way'.

Steve, bless him, was doing his Mr Memory act – 'I'm sure her name has a G in it, somewhere... doesn't it?' – while the three of us debated whether or not he'd notice if we set fire to him.

We had just decided it was either Marty Webb, Marti Caine, Faith Brown, Sheila Stefell – or a combination of all four – when Chris revealed to one and all that it was the same woman who had sung 'Ben'.

"You mean the Michael Jackson song about a psychotic rat?"

Chris gave me a look of distaste while Ski Walker, the Third Man of our Gang of Three (Steve, bless him, didn't count) pointed out that this time it had been for a rug-rat, Ben Hardwick, to raise money for a liver transplant.

"Whipped up to a fund-raising frenzy, people were throwing themselves under buses in their efforts to donate something," he concluded, knowingly.

"But surely an adult one would've been too big for him?" I queried.

"He could've grown into it. Bit like the old family hand-me-downs really. You grow into them. Same difference."

6ft 8, 15 stone – and with a face that simply begs to be slapped with a raw cod fillet – Chris hurrumphed disgustedly, and

dragged out a handful of donor cards from his wallet.

Kidney, heart, eyes, liver – Chris scowled when I asked if he kept an order of sidesalad, mainly as he seemed to be making such a meal of it. When he went off to the bar Ski proceeded to show me a variation on the Three-Card Trick, or 'Chase The Lady' as it's known – only this time I couldn't find the Heart Transplant.

About five minutes later, Steve assured us that he was certain that there definitely was a G in it somewhere. Within seconds Chris had found a full box of matches.

Actually, I was in a chemist's in Plymouth when that came back to me, prompted by the sight of some donor cards and a petition to make the carrying of said cards mandatory – like the wearing of seatbelts, in fact, though the similarity is rather slim.

I remember a few years back that there was talk of Body Donor cards to replace all the different organ-specific ones around at the time, which were leading to some confusion as to who could have what –

"Good Heavens Mrs Johnson, it's your lucky day! We've just had first refusal for a coach crash on the Mill Southbound, so we can offer you several matched pairs of kidneys, 25% off your varicose veins, and a half dozen bottles of Type O positive. Or, we could do you a special on a complete

Heart and Lung, and all for the Bargain Bucket sum of..."

Despite this, I'm in favour of a Body Donor Card that gives the medical profession first shout on anything usable. It should have a rider saying that the medical profession would fork out for the funeral – or at least help make the stiff look respectable should its dearly beloved wish to put it on show, something that seems to be quite popular with our Colonial Cousins on the other side of the Big Spit. I have say that when I go I definitely do not want to be put on show after the fact, and that's a fact

Bad taste aside, I don't fancy drunken relatives honking their grief – or their buffet lunch for that matter – into my casket. It's bad enough thinking about the grown-ups, but the thought of some pre-pubescent 'poppet' thrusting a jam-encrusted finger up my nostrils, or Tuna and Cucumber Triangles down the front of my trousers leaves me cold. Or, in this case, colder.

No, I think a simple funeral would be more fitting for my final exit from the Stage of Life. But even then such simple things are fraught with problems and decisions.

Consider it ecologically. Do I go for cremation, and add to the Greenhouse Effect? (Actually, I expect catalytic converters will be a standard fit for Crematoriums in future – as would be the switch from North Sea Gas to such things as Methane.). Or do I go for a 'Hole in the Ground' Traditional thing – thus taking up valuable space on



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Chuck Connor

this overcrowded world of ours?

Either way, I would still have to be crated up before I could be shipped off this Mortal Coil, as Health and Safety Regulations dictate that you cannot just go lobbing stiffs into the ground to decompose naturally. And I'd like to think that anything that came along looking for a free lunch on my ample carcass was going to get at least a mouthful of splinters.

If there's no choice – 'cremation for all, and none of yer whingin'!' – then I certainly do not want any flowers or 'In Loving Memory' wreaths. I mean, the urn is going to be full enough, with all that wood ash. The last thing I'll need in there too will be the residue from lots of bunches of flowers (probably picked for their price rather than their artistic style); in years to come, if anyone lifts the lid of my urn and finds it almost full to overflowing with cinders and wood screws, I don't want them thinking "God! what a fat bastard he must've been!"

There are other arrangements to be made as well. The music, for instance. Peter Sellers had *In The Mood* (which, when all's said and done, was rather fitting). I would like to follow in his footsteps and go for something a little out of the ordinary.

There was a wonderful song called *You Gotta Be A Hustler If You Want To Get On*, sung, I believe, by a woman called Sue Wilkinson – *You've got to be a hustler if you want to get on / being good can only hold you back* – but I expect that the chances of getting that past a vicar range from almost non-existent down to absolute zero.

A nice traditional slow blues number might get past the celestial censors. Except that The Blues are sad by nature, and that's something I wouldn't want to compound on this once-only occasion. So Little Oscar Strickler's rendition of *Suicide Blues* can be scratched off the Pastor's Payola Playlist, but such things as John Lee Hooker's *Hoochie Coochie Man* or even The Swan Silvertones and their spiritualistic *Get Your Soul Right* are bound to get the required seal of approval.

There is a nice, rousing, march that I would be most proud to depart to, but which I can only identify from the lyrics which I learned from ceremonial presentations and inspections — "Have you ever

caught your bollocks in a rat trap, yes a rat trap, oh a rat trap..." which is hardly the sort of thing you could sing to your local librarian and ask her to "Name That Tune".

What I really need to identify that tune is a visual connection – an association easily recognizable anywhere in the world, from the pulsating heart of civilization out to the boondocks of Prehistorica. The most obvious modern example of has to be *Torvill and Dean's Bolero* –

"Excuse me, lass, but you got t'recording of that music yon bint with the big bum, and that nancy-boy friend of 'ers, goes skating to? Tain't fer me, you understand. S'fer 't missus, like.."

– though quite who it was who partnered Ravel through the 1980, 1982 and 1983 World Championships – not forgetting the European Championships "Live from Budapest" – escapes me.

What I'd like to do with the music is to try and dispel some of the sadness that normally surrounds funerals. I mean, how could you find any cremation sad if, when it was finally time for the dear departed to depart to their rendezvous with Regulo Gas Mark 9, the organist whopped a couple of flashing blue police lights on top of the coffin and, after 10 seconds of police siren, cranked out the old Sweet classic, *Blackbustler*?

Having sorted out the music, let's move on to the single most important factor at any funeral. The Man of the Cloth himself – and I don't mean the salesperson at Burton's who flogged you your mourning top hat and tails on a sale or return basis.

I think that, given the choice, my choice of vicar may well prove hard to find in those far-flung future days. Let's face it, it's already difficult to find the old and bold Hellfire and Damnation merchants. You know the kind I'm talking about here – the sort of Theological (Theosophical?) Rambo

of the pulpit who begin by telling the congregation that it consists wholly and solely of "Unrepentant Sinners who will all surely rot in Hell, in HELL, I say to you!" while glaring at you bloodshot-eyed, furry-tongued and more than a little hung over from their 18-pint Saturday night binge on either Olde Wodger or Bishop's Tipple down the local village pub. The English Dirty Harry clergy that carried a .357 King James and weren't afraid to use it. Hell, those guys kicked real religious ass and had the respect of little old ladies as well!

Perhaps some of you are wondering: "Why does the mentally unstable bugger want to choose the vicar when he will already be well and truly nailed down for the last time?" I can only say that when I do finally kick off this plane of existence it just wouldn't feel right unless your mortal souls were also given a chance to repent and be saved along with my own. Yes, the old 'safety in numbers' ploy!

Of course, there would also have to be an element of high theatrical mystery.

A lone young woman – slim, tall, dressed in obviously expensive black (georgette, gross graine, whatever, trimmed up in black wild silk) – a real Jerry Hall clone (all legs and no knickers, a natural honey blonde as well, worn in a low-slung pageboy or bob style, black kid gloves – a career woman who breaks men's hearts just for the fun of it) whose face is almost totally obscured by her veil. She would enter the church when the lesson reading had finished – just prior to the final curtain call – dab delicately at the corners of her eyes, heave a heavy, sorrowful sigh of grief, and then leave again without saying a word to anyone at all. Hell, have her drive away in her deep black early 1930s Hispano-Suiza. Well, c'mon, everyone's got a Rolls. Haven't they?

Whatever, it would be the classic exit in that it would leave the punters guessing – and just think of the amount of gossip that it would generate – which is the name of the game, is it not?

Actually, when time and tide finally catch up with me, I don't suppose I'll be so off-handish about it all. But for the life of me I just cannot see any point in people mourning my passing. Far, far better to go



rather
like the idea of
being stuffed and
mounted under glass

without leaving a vacuum that demands to be filled with sadness.

So it has to be a novelty send-off. Which is why I got annoyed when I read that the authorities had got wind of (and thus banned before the act) the written wish of one of the Monster Raving Loony Party candidates that, when he died, his body should be chopped up and fed to the dogs in the Battersea Dogs Home.

I suspect there is a touch of vote-catching here – the British are a Nation of Animal Lovers, and dogs feature fairly highly in the Top Twenty Pets – but it would've been a classic departure – and at last the poor dear long-suffering doggies would have had the chance to legitimately bite the hand that fed them.

Another classic idea would be to hang around well after the fact. I rather like the idea of being stuffed and mounted under glass and preserved for all time. I don't think I would look good displayed in someone's hall or lounge, though... but discreetly placed in a study, say, or kept upstairs, in one of those Victorian attic rooms with the large windows and a sloping ceiling, that would be fine.

And, of course, if I was just left in an attic for decades, generations even, there is always the possibility of becoming a family heirloom –

"...Two Georgian silver teapots; a set of late Sixties photographs (three poses, five pounds); one stuffed stiff, seven copies of *Snow White Meets Godzilla*..."

– a veritable static Dorian Grey – only this time the picture and the person would have become inseparable and thus immortal in the process of mortality.

No. I suspect that, as with the Battersea Dogs Home Free Lunch & Buffet, the Authorities would balk at the final fence and award me at least a ten second *penalty for a refusal at Realistic Behaviour. And for 'Realistic' read either 'Acceptable' or 'Tasteful'.

Finally, the question of 'What next?' – the real Ultimate Question of Death, The Universe, and Everything. Is there an Afterlife? And, more importantly, do we particularly want an Eternal Afterlife, and if we do then what are we going to actually do for all Eternity?

If you take the bog-standard Traditionalist package (a bit like the 18-30 Holidays to Spain) then the first essential will be flying lessons so as to obtain your Pilot's License (in fact, quite a lot like the 18-30 Holidays to Spain).

Of course, if it could be called a Pilot's License might be debatable. Owing to the obvious historical connotations, a Pilot's License may well turn out to be something similar to a referee's Red Card, closely followed by an attendant carrying the soap and fresh towels.

The other Traditionalist essential must be music lessons for the freebie harp. Of course, if, at the Pearly Gates, Saint Peter were going to offer me a Stenberg 24-track sequencer with full MIDI etc, I might start thinking about the path to redemption...

So, anyway, you've gotten your wings and the musical accoutrements: then what do you do?

My version version of Hell is very like the Real World of today

I just can't help feeling, as The Devil (as played by Peter Cook) says in the film *Bedazzled*, that after a while it's all going to get a bit tedious 'Singing His praises all the time...' Is it really going to be like that? Or do you get time off for Good Deed Behaviour? A couple of weeks of clouds and harp practice and you're bound to be climbing the walls, aren't you?

And if this is Heaven...

Then what of Hell?

Hell must exist on a very personal level, as I doubt that two peoples' idea of what real torment is can ever be the same. And for my Hell there would be no forking flames and little red devils. There are things far, far, far worse than that, I can assure you.

Such as?

Well, my rough idea of Hell would be a single room, with a nice comfy chair, warm

fire, contented dog, slippers, the works.

But then the torments would begin!

Every book I would pick up to read would be a Mills & Boone, or a red Desire Romance novel which always consists of some Southern Belle in illicit lust with some Damn Yankee.

The radio will only have 'Steeeeeve Wright in the After-nooooooon!' no matter what time of day or night, forever recounting those creaking and ancient 'True Stories', and humiliating people publicly in the name of Comedy and Entertainment.

The television will show nothing but Gummy Beagle deliberately terrorizing and humiliating people in the name of Comedy and Entertainment.

And every time I pick up the telephone in a desperate attempt to communicate with the outside world all I'll get is the voice of some aged scouse bint saying 'Sur-prrr-eyes, sur-prrr-eyes, Chuck!' who will then try to humiliate me in the name of Comedy and Entertainment.

But if you don't laugh uproariously – when Steeve says 'Yer a trainspo'er, ain't'cha!'; when Gummy destroys your lawn with a JCB as some kind of 'harmless wizard prank!'; or when Cilla rakes over the ashes of long dead, and best forgotten, relationships – then you're nothing more than a 'sour-faced fuddy-duddy killjoy!'

Strangely enough, my version of Hell is very like the Real World today. You may say that there is always the Off button, but if Hell is really the way I imagine it, then it seems likely that there is no escape!

The alternative to this carrot & stick stuff is Reincarnation ('Rebirth' sounds a little yucky considering what the world implies).

Ah yes, no longer happy with rolling around this life the first time, when it comes to your time to shuffle off to Buffalo you could find yourself shuffling right back again. This is The Boomerang Theory of Life: no matter how hard you try to throw it all away, you just keep on coming back for more. And the strange thing about this Encore Stuff of Life is that it seems to feature in quite a few religions. Everything from the artificially produced Dianetics (L. Ron Hubbard wrote some passable fiction in his early years, but since his death he seems to be concentrating on his *Battlefield Earth* macerator cripplers) through to



Zen and the art of Skoda Maintenance. Spoilt for choice, in fact.

Curiously, there seems to be no allowance for us to return to this spiral of existence as an inanimate object – so returning as a young lady's leather bicycle seat is out of the question.

Having thus disposed of the #1 choice, what's left?

Well, I have to admit that I could go for being reincarnated as part of the team that makes First Contact. I could see that as being worth the hassles of coming back. I doubt that there would ever be a more important and historical event, and yes if it meant I had 'to be good for a whole year' then I'd do it.

Ideally, the event should take place in orbit around Earth, or at the very least within the Sol system. Communications technology is unlikely to overcome the problems of distance, and when you're talking long distance (physically and metaphorically) you're finding degradation of intelligence. For this important event it just has to be on a straight one-on-one face-off.

**I could
go for being reincarnated
as part of the team that
makes First Contact.**

Just picture the scene – in orbit around Earth, the brilliant blues, browns and whites, and the moon rising in the background so that the sun illuminates the whole show as grand as it ever could be – sparkly clean and clear of the pollution we have at the moment. Yes, even California.

Zoom in to the segment of the Earth's curvature where the moon is rising – and, against a background of swirling white clouds, the sun is glinting in metallic flashes from both spacecraft, although one shows all the signs of long distance space travel. On the soundtrack, we can

hear the ships exchanging data to aid their orbital adjustments.

Zoom in again to show the Earthship actually docking, locking on and equalizing pressures. It's a whole, glorious, triumphant time – more than that small step and giant leap thing, this is the First Contact between Earthling and Alien – it's physical, it's tactile, it's the Point of No Return damnit!

Split screen, on the left there is part of the airlock and the Earthling, on the right part of the airlock and the Alien. The airlock opens slowly, and from both sides you see the two bodies coming together for the very first meeting of all.

I want to be there. I want to walk across that short distance and extend my limb in our time-honoured greeting.

And I'd carry on extending that limb until I knocked the other spacesuited figure solidly to the deck. Then I'd key in my vox and tell them back in the mothership that it was time to deep-six the planet, and into my translator I'd ask:

"An' how'd'ya like those apples, Earthman!?" 🍎

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ON THE LEDGE

Barrington J. Bayley

Cleaver's bad day began as he crossed the front door step to set off for the office. He had eaten a good breakfast with plenty of hot coffee, and had spent a few minutes playing with his two children. As always, the shiny blonde hair and dreamy blue eyes of the three-year-old girl had caused him special delight.

Everything was as it mostly was, for a contented, middle-aged family man.

He called to the kitchen to tell his wife he was leaving. But then, on the doorstep, a sudden spasm of vertigo assailed him. To his distorted vision, the step on which he stood seemed a mile high. He felt dizzy, sick, and swayed for a moment.

But only for a moment. He crossed the threshold and took his car from the garage, forcing himself to feel only slightly shaken. Stupid imagination, he thought.

But he wiped sweat from his brow before he switched on the ignition. To feel unsafe on a *doorstep!*

Fear of heights was a handicap he had learned to live with for many years. Even to stand on a second-floor fire escape sent him into a panic. He was habitually careful, therefore, to avoid confronting any sudden drop in elevation. When in tall buildings he never ventured near the windows, and he always took the elevator rather than the stairs. Never, never, on any account, would he approach a clifftop.

But to feel unsafe on a *doorstep!* He hoped, as he turned the motor over, that he was not going to have to be on his guard against imaginary heights too.

By the time he had finished his short journey it was out of his mind. The small office where he and his partner Vince ran an import-export business was solid and reassuring. In his overstuffed swivel chair he spent a happy two hours engrossed in cargo-handling orders.

Today was Friday: at five the week-end began. At eleven his wife rang. Did he remember the Fosters were coming Sunday?

"Yes, of course I remember."

"I was wondering what we might give them to eat."

Cleaver leaned back and his eyes glazed. He enjoyed this sort of detail and encouraged his wife to depend on him to plan menus. "Well, let's see... how about a crab cocktail to start with? Then steaks, with sweetcorn and a fancy salad, creme caramel to follow... I'll pick up some wine later."

He put the phone down and began looking forward to Sunday evening, imagining the *gemütlich* security of his home, talking to the Fosters, getting pleasantly tipsy. It was months since he had seen them.

Back on the job. A note from a customer to ask if he had clearance on twenty-five gross of children's shoes. He got up and stepped to the filing cabinet, unable to remember on the spur of the moment, fretting over the laxness of his memory lately.

Then it happened again, almost as soon as he was on his feet. A moment of blind terror. A draining of blood from his head. He thought he felt a blast of cold wind against his face. He fancied there was rock at his back. He was convinced he was perched precariously far above the ground. He closed his eyes, trying to fight the terrifying dizziness. Had he stood up too quickly? Was he out of condition?

It faded. He stumbled to the filing cabinet, fumbled inside. Vince looked up at him.

"You all right?"

"Felt dizzy for a moment. It's nothing."

"Mind yourself."

He found the clearance. An hour later his wife rang again (she phoned two or three times a day on average, a regularity he found soothing). She reminded him that it was her niece's wedding tomorrow. "Don't forget to collect your suit from the cleaners."

The words got lost. Her voice was becoming involved in a winding dark tunnel stretching away and away from the phone, faint and distant, surrounded by other sounds he could not quite hear: shouts, calls, clinking noises.

"You won't forget the suit?"

"I'll go and get it now."

He put down the phone. "I've an errand to run, Vince. Might have lunch at the same time."



"Right."

The traffic was heavy when he emerged from the foyer. He paused at the kerb and waited for the lights to change. The air felt warm. Wafts of it blew in his face as vehicles rushed past. The traffic noise dinning into him, he made his thoughts cling to his errand like a limpet: collect the suit.

His foot touched the edge of the kerb.

His back was to bare rock. He stood on a narrow crumbling ledge barely wide enough for his feet. Wind whipped at him, terrifying emptiness lay ahead, below was the valley floor, over which he was poised at a horrendous height. He was rigid, desperate for his hands to find holds but equally desperate not to press against the rock for fear of pushing himself off the ledge.

Slowly, hesitantly, advancing themselves as if from another world, the street, the traffic, the kerb all returned, but the senses of menace and terror remained. Despite that, when the lights changed Cleaver made it across the road, made it into the dry cleaner, presented his ticket and collected his suit. He nearly didn't make it back, though. He nearly balked when it came to stepping to the kerb again, only managing it, he was convinced, because the lights were with him and he could walk forward without pausing.

Back in the office he told his partner he was going home. "Don't feel too well after all."

Vince looked up at him, concerned, solicitous. "Sure you'll be alright? Let me drive you home."

"No, I'll be okay. Just need a long week-end, I expect."

He hated the thought that he might be in need of a psychiatrist. It was a long time since he had had any vertigo dreams, which once had been a regular, recurring feature of his life. Could it be that they were surfacing into his waking state instead?

Don't worry about it now, he urged himself. Get home. He wanted his cosy, safe house, his wife, his little girl, his little boy. Everything cheerful and routine. Watch television, read stories to the kids.

Better not drive home, he thought, as he tucked the suit under his arm. In the street, he spotted a taxi.

But he couldn't raise his free arm to hail it. The noise of the traffic receded and mingled with other noises: chinkings, the rattle of stones tumbling down a cliff face. Then it was as if a curtain fell down his vision. When it raised again it was onto a different scene. He was on the ledge. There was no suit under his arm. There was no suit on his body. His body was a tough body, not the flabby businessman's one he had known, and it was clad in leather and fine chain.

Dangling from his belt was a cleaver, his favourite weapon, which his father had long ago taught him to use better than a sword. He had not moved, he was still rigid, refusing to look down at the valley while at the same time knowing what he would see there: a shining river that was a menacing snake, at the bottom of a howling drop that threatened at any instant to be his drop.

He fancied he felt his foot sliding on the gravelly ledge.

Then his eyes went out of focus and *another* scene tried to impinge itself on his consciousness. It was like adream coming to life, a picture of a bustling, alien street down which swept weird vehicles. Other images struggled to claim him: a wife, children, shining fair hair, dreamy blue eyes.

He became aware of someone calling to him from above. A looped rope had descended; it dangled before him.

"Take the rope!" a familiar, vigorous voice told him. "We'll haul you up!"

It should have been easy. Grab the rope with both hands, put his foot in the loop, hold on and up he would go.

But he could not grab and could not put his foot in the loop. He could neither move nor speak. He stood as motionless as the rock behind him while after an interval the rope was taken up.

Presently it reappeared. Dangling on it was a bearded man, wearing harness-like gear of leather and metal like his own, who grinned at him affably.

"Frozen up, eh? Come on, I'll take you."

Cleaver recognised him. His name was Arzho, and it had been his voice that had called to him from the clifftop. Arzho swung close and suddenly wrapped his arms round Cleaver, who as he was pulled off the ledge instinctively closed his own arms round his rescuer. Arzho's harness dug into him, but he hung on. He could feel Arzho's legs on either side of him, walking up the cliff face as they were pulled aloft at near running speed.

Not until they were at the top and hands were helping them to solid ground did he open his eyes. He was ushered away from the terrible cliff edge, and found himself treading springy turf. Arzho was divesting himself of the rope, which trailed some distance away to where stood four others who had hauled them up swiftly by the expedient of running backwards with the rope, like a tug-of-war team.

It was amazing how quickly the terror left him once he experienced the wonderful, incredible solidity of the ground beneath his feet. Just the same, he was trembling with reaction. He turned, looking back at the gaping chasm –

Everyone was staring at him. At *him*, hardened Gar Cleaver who had come with two hundred marches and never shown fright before.

Arzho, seeing that his stricken look had a different quality to it, stepped up to him before his daze of terror could turn to one of shame. He clapped him on the shoulder.

"It's alright, Gar! It's happened to better men than any of us. But there's one thing you must do."

Gar nodded. A part of him protested and shied away from this moment, but he knew that now was the time if they were ever to trust him again.

They all stood back: he would receive no help in this. Clenching his jaw muscles, he strode to the cliff edge, stood for one second looking into nothing, and then looked down.

Down. He went dizzy, but forced himself to stand there, not to sway too much, taking a hold on his consciousness as fierce as that with which he had gripped Arzho when coming



off the ledge. The valley was actually an extraordinarily long and broad canyon, but the cliff face was unusually sheer for such a formation. Down, down, down, hurtling towards the mocking silver snake....

He could see the ragged line that he had thought might be a trail down the cliff, but which instead had petered out, so that he had slipped, had gone falling, feeling the rock scratching and whizzing against his back, till miraculously his feet had landed on the precarious ledge only ten or twenty feet below. And there he had stood, paralysed with shock, not knowing if he would ever be found.

To attempt the descent on his own, without pitons or rope, had been the height of foolhardiness. He knew he would lose more respect for that, than for freezing up.

How long had he stood on the ledge? When he came to the canyon he had been an hour or two in advance of the others, eager to scout ahead while they rested. Half an hour finding the false trail and following it down...

He whirled round, almost careless of the drop behind him, surveying in his mind's eye the whole way he had come, looking back over the life he now remembered. Raised by a father who had schooled him for a life of action. Service in the King's Own Column, learning to use sword and spear instead of the cleaver he preferred. And now the expedition, financed by the King's Council, to find the near-legendary city of Asardo.

They had already lost one man making their way through the still unpopulated tribal region. Their horses had been unable to manage the ascent to the plateau, and so they had crossed its bare expanse on foot. But, until this incident, they had been a good team. And if their information was correct Asardo would lie at the end of the valley, where the river was said to empty into a deep inland lake. Another forty days should do it.

Arzho came closer. "We were calling to you for about twenty minutes, but you didn't answer."

"I didn't even hear you." Gar Cleaver continued to stare into his past. But he was trying to recover that *other* past, which now he knew he had lived while standing on the ledge, and which still seemed as real to him as this one. A strange world, owing nothing to his memory of life. A Cleaver who was himself and yet not himself. Comfort, a home, a wife, the giggling young voices of the dreamy-eyed Josephine and the boy, Jonathan, barely four years older but already good at drawing. And he stood, his face a frozen mask of puzzlement, and wondered where it had all come from.

They skirted the canyon for several hours before finding a place where Burrul, the team leader, decided to make the descent. Dividing into two roped groups, they made Gar the lead man of the second one so that if he came off or froze again he would present least danger to the others. It was a gruelling six hours; but everything went without mishap and by evening they were camped beside the broad, rolling river, able to admire the incredible cliffs that towered up on either side.

Gar knew he needed advice. He knew he should have consulted Aeschas, the expedition's doctor who was as much a philosopher as a physician, having studied with the mentalist school. But up to now he had said nothing, even when Aeschas made sure to check his pulse and reflexes before letting him descend the canyon wall. When darkness fell and the party settled down to sleep, the doctor noticed that Gar laid his blanket apart from the others. The cleaver-wielder, staring sleeplessly at the stars, saw Aeschas' bulky form blot off the constellation of the *chorat*. He sat up as the physician sank down beside him.

Aeschas spoke in a quiet voice. "Fear of heights is a natural fear," he said. "Every human being has it in him. One slip and..." He paused. "Have you suffered often from vertigo before?"

"To some extent. But I always choked it down." Gar shrugged. "Everyone's prey to it, just as you say. If I had admitted it to the examiners, they would have dropped me from the expedition."

"And this time you couldn't choke it down."

"I did at first. The length of time was what broke me. Standing there, feeling I might go at any moment. I can remember the first half hour or so, but after that..."

Gar bowed his head. With much difficulty, he unburdened himself. He told how he had visited another world, how he had become another person and lived another life. Describing this life, his voice shook with emotion. "Even now," he said, "I am not convinced that the other world is not the real one, and that this—" he gestured about him—"is not a dream, from which I shall awaken."

Arms folded, Aeschas heard him out. He nodded slowly.

"Listen carefully, while I explain what has happened to you," he said. "It is important that you should understand it. Otherwise you could become prey to recurring delusions. Our world is not a dream, it is real. As for your mental experience, it saved your sanity and probably your life."

Aeschas' features flickered in the light of the fire beside which their comrades slept. "Your mind was faced with the unendurable," he told Gar. "The real world became simply too threatening. So your mind retreated, cutting off your senses from actuality and creating another, illusory existence in which it might feel safe. The phenomenon is known to mentalists. It is a reaction to stress."

"If you examine the life you have just recounted, you will see that this is so," he went on. "It was the complete opposite of your true circumstances. In reality, you were apt at any moment to suffer the death you fear most—death by falling. So your mind devised a world where security and comfort were everything. In reality, too, you are a man of action, a fighting man, and instead your inner consciousness turned you into a soft, inactive husband and father, immersed in domesticity, pursuing a quiet occupation."

"But how could I have invented a whole world?" Gar said. "Where did I get all that detail?"

"How could we invent even our ordinary dreams? The



subconscious mind is astonishingly creative. In our ordinary waking state, however, it is unavailable to us – experiments with hypnotism have proved this. As a matter of fact the very strangeness of the world you describe is evidence that its source is in the subconscious – the huge cities, the peculiar machines, the wagons that move without animals to haul them."

"And the customs, the dress – everything was different," Gar conceded despairingly.

"And the language?" the physician asked sharply. "Was that different?"

Gar reflected. "I cannot say," he sighed. "I simply spoke, as we are accustomed to speaking." He clenched his fist. "But how could I forget such a life? It was *real*. I *know* it was real!"

"I think I can demonstrate that it was not," the physician said patiently. "Think back over your life – by that I mean *this* life. Recall some incident in your boyhood, the earlier the better." Gar hesitated, and he urged. "As your physician, I must ask you to oblige me in this."

"If you say so," consented Gar grumpily. He was briefly silent.

"Very well. I remember when I tried to make a chariot by harnessing a box to a *morath*..." He grunted fondly at the memory. "I would be about six years old."

"Thank you. Now I want you to take your mind to the *other* life you claim to have lived. Try to recall something from

your boyhood *there*."

"Well, there weren't any *moraths*, though they have an animal of about the same size. It's called a dog..."

His voice subsided.

"Anything at all," Aeschas encouraged, looking at him intently. "Any incident, as long as you remember it clearly."

Gar screwed up his face in concentration.

His expression became agonised. "I *can't*!" he admitted in a choked voice. "There's just... nothing!"

"You see? No childhood. No depth. It was episodic, like a dream."


A sob escaped the other, and Aeschas witnessed the strange sight of the big man fighting to hold back tears. "You're right! I had no history! No past! I was just there! Just *there*!"

"You have broken the grip of the delusion."

The physician judged that this was the moment for him to leave. Gar needed solitude, now, to lay the ghost in his mind.

Without speaking further he rose and moved away, receding into the darkness.

Behind him, Gar's memory became filled with a vision of shiny blonde hair and dreamy blue eyes. Entirely outside his volition a cry was torn from him, so loud that the men round the campfire started up from their sleep.

"But *where* are my children?" Gar's desperate voice protested. "*Where* are my children!" 

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Lagoda had smooth, brown shoulders and rough, brown hands. Her deep, brown eyes shone with a clear, distant light.

Enkor was a man of moderation, in build and in ambition, but he loved Lagoda quite immoderately, which suited her just fine.

Love was the subject of the moment, morning sunshine sparking but not yet hot on the white wall of Lagoda's clean, cluttered little house.

Enkor and Lagoda coupled top, bottom and sideways, bodies and souls mingling in pleasure. Nearly sated, they slowed, but still caressed, when the Crocodile Person walked through the wall.

Silent the Person came, but both woman and man sensed a presence, cool as a shadowed mushroom. Lagoda stretched to look up, healthy sweat glistening on her body. Enkor raised his head. A man of moderate height and musculature, he might have leapt to their defence, but stood instead in naked astonishment.

The Crocodile Person stood hand to chin, and a very long chin it was for a Person if not especially so for a Crocodile. The green stripes of his tie did little to break the monotony of his grey, if expensive suit. Of course, the effect was rather lost on the naked couple, whose knowledge of fashion remained provincial.

"Warm, isn't it?" said Lagoda to soften the brittle atmosphere.

"Weight distribution diffuses expenditure", said the Crocodile Person.

"Beg pardon?" said Lagoda.

The Crocodile Person did not deign to reply.

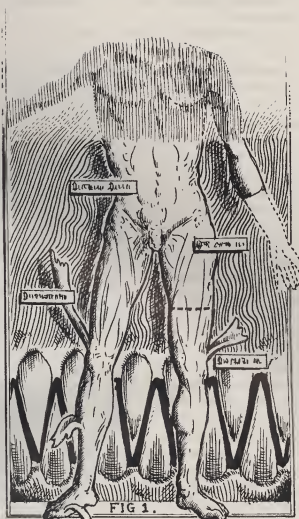
Enkor stood up, moderately insulted. "Sir, please have a cushion," he said. "We'll prepare some snoofh."

The Crocodile Person walked part way through the kitchen wall and stood with a knee in the stove.

Lagoda, somewhat hesitantly, reached to the high, polished shelf for the orange glazed cups, while Enkor lifted the crock of snoofh from its cool corner. With the flavour of a mouldy rat's nest, snoofh had little nutritional value and no intoxicating properties, but hospitality ranked high in Enkor's values. Lagoda admired his grace.

Enkor stopped to admire the curve of Lagoda's hips and the small of her back and the way her side merged with the bend of her breast and then decided hospitality required some formality. So he put on his fringed shoulder strap, which lay on a heap of possible-useful bits of metal and cloth at the foot of Lagoda's bed, the buff-coloured sheets still somewhat rumpled from their lovemaking.

The Crocodile Person grabbed Enkor by the left wrist



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The Nature of

Uncle River

PROPERTY

with a hand cool and dry as a walnut shell. Enkor lost his balance, knocking the snoofh crock to the floor where it shattered across the ember-red square tiles into a rat's-nest-aromatic pool.

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" cried Lagoda. "A stain before company!"

Hoppy-toads, in their tiny hundreds, pittered through the house (it was the time of year). Two or three, caught in the puddle, writhed, demented. Merciless, the rest ignored their dolorous kin.

Quick as a chainsaw throttle, the Crocodile Person measured Enkor's left leg, from thigh to arch of his dusty, caloused foot.

Lagoda fluttered a nervous minuett with her mop.

"Reguismosoforthim," said the Crocodile Person.

Lagoda bowed her head in shame. Even the hoppy-toads were embarrassed.

The Crocodile Person couldn't care less. He wasn't thirsty anyhow. He walked right through the snoofh puddle, careful only of possible shards.

A bit dizzy, dangling upside down as he was, Enkor spoke with doubt: "Haven't we another crock behind the privy?"

"That old thing," Lagoda despaired, "blotchy and chipped. Company..." She wrung her hands.

"He seems quite informal," Enkor paddled at the air above the hoppy-toads and the snoofh, dangling now by his right calf from the confident grip of their unexpected guest.

The Crocodile Person dropped Enkor with a splat, heedless of shards (though he hitched up his expensive grey trousers for the splash). Enkor stood, scratched here and there, disoriented.

The Crocodile Person rummaged in the pockets of his business suit, neatly folding back the crisp, grey flaps. With a cavernous yawn of annoyance, he ascended six invisible steps till the top of his head was lost in the ceiling, then walked back out through the wall. He soon reappeared with a syringe, fully half as long as a human arm. The needle, thicker than a blue-dry blade of grass, if twice as sharp, stuck on the wall.

"Damn whitewash!" the Crocodile Person fumed, with a yank. The needle popped through. A white chip dropped to the floor. A dozen hoppy-toads eagerly licked it brown and bare.

A look of mystical awe filled Enkor's face. Lagoda continued to wring her hands round the mop, unaware, as she looked on

while the Crocodile Person impaled Enkor through the belly with the needle, depressed the plunger, and injected a gallon and a half of foamy pink fluid into his body.

Enkor's normally flat bumpy belly bloated out as spasms of agony flushed through pulsing arms and shivering legs.

"Glaughk!" he gasped.

The Crocodile Person made no explanation, but Enkor probably couldn't have paid attention if he had.

Among the properties of the pink fluid, formerly in the syringe, now in Enkor, was to increase the body's sensitivity to pain enormously while equally increasing the body's ability to withstand it.

The Crocodile Person consulted his watch and Enkor's eyes. Quick as it took effect, some passage of time obtained for optimum flavour. Patience was an attribute the Crocodile Person held in moderate measure. Enkor could sympathise.

Though he would be more likely to at some other time. His concentration was currently somewhat diffuse as the pink fluid diffused with admirable rapidity through his arms and legs and head, all of which now felt as if they were filled more with fire than with fluid.

As Enkor's spasms slowed to a steady excruciating pulse, the Crocodile Person picked him up again, by the left armpit and right knee, and began to gnaw on Enkor's left leg. The Crocodile Person bit off the

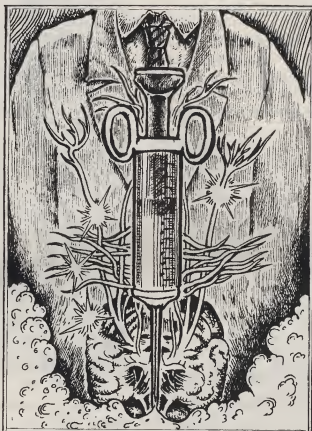
foot at the ankle and spat it out, but then steadied to a pensive munch.

Bones crunched and tendons snapped. Blood dripped, slightly pinkish and frothing into the puddle of snoofh, scoring and staining the orderly, black grout among the red tiles of Lagoda's floor.

Lagoda set the mop on her head and hopped back and forth in close rapport, ashamed that, without the pain-enhancing fluid from the Crocodile Person's syringe, she felt only an echo of Enkor's mourning.

Ruthless, the hoppy-toads cared not a whit. "Have you no manners?" Enkor asked in a moment of lucidity between bites, but of course he knew they hadn't.

The Crocodile Person leisurely consumed Enkor's entire leg and took a nibble or two out of the buttock. But by then the pink fluid from the syringe, entering its second phase, coagulated the blood. Flavour remained satisfactory. Enkor's continued enhanced agony ensured that. But the Crocodile



Person no longer cared for the texture; the meal is sufficient unto its measure, he mused.

The Crocodile Person tossed Enkor aside. Enkor hit the edge of the bed and landed on the floor, eyes bugged out and all atwitch.

"Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!" Lagoda hopped frantically, the mop flopping over her eyes.

The Crocodile Person sat on a beige linen cushion for some time, while Enkor writhed and Lagoda flailed.

Thanks to the Crocodile Person's foamy pink fluid, Enkor neither bled to death nor lost consciousness. The increased sensitivity to pain would remain, residual as many years as he was likely to live, but the leg might take months to regenerate. The Crocodile Person sighed. Flavour wasn't everything, after all. Soft or hard, the texture always seemed to deteriorate with successive meals.

The Crocodile Person grew bored and left before Enkor became used to his pain.

Exhausted, Lagoda drooped to doze across a puffy cotton red and blue striped cushion. Enkor gently extracted the mop from her clenched fingers. Lagoda merely sighed and stirred in her sleep.

Enkor employed the mop to raise his fiery body onto its remaining foot. The raw wound stabbed and burned like a million flaming scorpions.

The rest of his body merely stung as if aswarm with centipedes and wasps.

The pain caused Enkor to see great, portentous visions, but none of them were clear enough to inform him of anything.

Thunder and jellied lightning blasted through Enkor's tortured brain. He wanted to clean the floor before Lagoda woke, but the puddle was congealed. Hopping with the mop as a crutch, Enkor headed for the kitchen to fetch a bucket of water. A mere three or four hops sufficed so to confuse him with pain that he no longer had any idea what he had set out to do. So he stood, his remaining leg throbbing, clinging to the mop as to a mast in a storm.

A man of moderation, Enkor grew neither bitter nor flabby as his leg slowly regenerated in the days and months that followed, though he had to be careful to expose the expanding new skin to the sun a little at a time.

Lagoda seemed permanently embarrassed at the loss of her snoofo-crock, but her cousin of the second degree, Omelia, presented her with a new one, shiny blue with lovely white

swirls and meanders, at the Golig's Day Festival, just before the dance. Enkor's leg was still too short to participate, a further embarrassment, but everyone pretended not to notice.

It was over two years before the Crocodile Person came back for Enkor's other leg. Delighted with the moderate texture, he returned thereafter every few months. At times, Enkor had no limbs at all and had to be fed like a baby.

A point arrived beyond which Enkor's sensitivity to pain could grow no further, though it diminished little enough. Yet he never did make any sense of his visions. He couldn't do any work when he had no limbs. Worse, his lovemaking suffered.

At last, Lagoda got up the courage to say something. Enkor's left leg and right arm were full size, and the right leg was coming along when the Crocodile Person walked through the wall in the midst of Enkor and Lagoda's immoderate lovemaking yet again.

Enkor fumbled for his shoulder strap, but instead of running for the snoofo, Lagoda stood akimbo on the bed, the rumpled sheets of green linen, and shouted: "This is too rude!"

The Crocodile Person wore a blue business suit and orange tie today, nearly as expensive as the grey suit but in execrable

taste. He fumbled in his pockets, having forgotten to bring in his syringe as usual. He wondered if it was even needed. Residual effect might suffice, but no point allowing so tasty a morsel to bleed to death finding out.

Resigned to his poor memory, the Crocodile Person plodded up the six invisible steps and through the wall.

It wasn't the season for hoppy-toads, but Enkor batted at a cloud of gnats, glad to have a hand, for the moment, with which to bat.

Lagoda stood on the bed, breathing hard.

The Crocodile Person reappeared, chipping the whitewash once again with his needle.

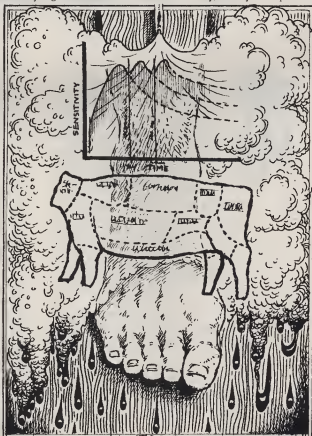
"Stop it, I say!" Lagoda screeched. "Have you no sense

of time?" Shocked at her own arrogance, she hung her head.

It didn't matter. The Crocodile Person cared no more for Lagoda's sense of propriety than the gnats, or the hoppy-toads (if there were any).

At least today no snoofo was spilled to mix with Enkor's foamy pink blood.

Twitching in exhausted agony as the Crocodile Person gnawed away his left leg once again, Enkor wondered if he ever would make any sense of the visions.



Memories of

Ortygia House



48

ORTYGIA



In the beginning there was Eve.

She was born Evelyn Dawe in 1893 into an England, and a comfortable, seemingly secure way of life that we can experience now only through fiction.

She belonged to a lost world, and, to a certain extent, managed to maintain a hold on it for all her life. Despite the shattering effects of the Great war – she lost two brothers to it, and many friends – her life afterwards was not very different from the life her parents must have expected for her. Unlike many women of her generation she married, she never had to work, and she was always financially secure. She married Mr Smith, a man of her class whose health did not permit him to hold a steady job. Luckily, his private means did not require him to work, and there was plenty of leisure for the couple, who had no children, to appreciate the finer things in life. There was travel, often abroad until the Second World War. Mr Smith died in middle-age, and in 1952 his widow sold the house they had lived in together, and chose to make her home in one of the many properties that

were her inheritance. She settled into the top flat of Ortygia House, 6 Lower Road, Harrow, an elderly woman living quietly alone in her declining years.

Ortygia House had a history before Eve Smith came to own it, of course, but I don't know much about it. It would have been built in the early 1800s, probably before 1820, as a single-family dwelling (single family, in the terms of those times, including their servants). Until the early 1970s an almost identical house stood next door, and there is another, owned by the Harrow School, a little further up the hill. In more modern times – I don't know whether it was before or just after World War II – the house was divided into five self-contained flats and two single-car garages.

What about that name? When I first asked, I was told that Ortygia was a classical reference, chosen because the house had originally been occupied by the classics master at Harrow School. Pursuing the classical reference I learned that it was a place name; a Greek island; and that it meant 'quail'. According to Robert Graves there were three Ortygias in the Classical world –

Lisa Tuttle



the name meaning either 'quail place' or 'quail island' – the most famous being the small islet off Delos where Artemis was born. The name derived from its being used as a regular rest stop by huge flocks of quail on their annual spring migration to the north. Also according to Graves, 'The quail is notorious for its pugnacity and lechery' and 'Artemis, originally an orgiastic goddess, had the lascivious quail as her sacred bird'. Although Artemis and Apollo were twins, they had different birthplaces. Here's why: Zeus had the hots for Leto and in order to keep his wife Hera from finding out, he transformed Leto and himself into quail before having sex. But Hera found out, as she usually did, and, as usual, hounded the poor woman, by this time heavily pregnant, refusing to let her rest. Eventually Leto managed to stay long enough on the tiny isle of Ortygia to give birth to the first of her babies, Artemis, no sooner was she out of the womb than Artemis was helping her mother cross the strait to Delos where she acted as midwife to the birth of her brother Apollo. Which explains why Artemis, the Amazonian huntress and paragon of single women everywhere, is also called upon for help by women in childbirth. Anyway, as Delos was sacred to Apollo, no one else was allowed to be born there, so pregnant women had to be ferried across to Ortygia when their time was near. I can't see what relevance any of this has to the Harrovian Ortygia House, unless the house next door, now long since demolished, used to be Delos House. Given the later residents of Ortygia House, Delos – birthplace of Apollo, patron of poetry – or Pieria, home of the Muses, would have been more appropriate.

The first writer to live in Ortygia House was Christopher Priest. In May 1969 he moved into the bottom flat with his wife Christine. Flat Number One was known as the basement flat for the purpose of its rateable value, and certainly from the front it appeared to be. The entrance down a short, steep flight of

concrete steps, the front window well below ground-level, the small, damp-smelling entrance hall where ivy grew, trained by Chris to disguise *other* growths on the walls and the bubbling, peeling paint... Yet once through the hall and into the long, light living room you were on the ground floor, looking out through French doors into a magical treasure of a garden.

Tom's *Midnight Garden*, a children's novel by Philippa Pearce first published in 1958, tells the story of a little boy staying with relatives who are renting rooms in an old house from the old woman who owns it. Late at night Tom hears the clock strike thirteen and discovers that outside the house, instead of the cramped, paved area between modern buildings that exists in the daytime, there is a wonderful large garden and a little girl, Hatty, to play with. But the garden appears only at night, and the little girl is a little older each time he meets her. Eventually we learn that Tom has been entering into the memories of the old woman – who at night goes back in her dreams to childhood and the garden that was once there.

When I first came to Ortygia House in 1979 as Chris's guest, I felt as if I'd wandered into the setting of one of my favourite books. Somehow, although Ortygia House had been carved up into separate flats, the beautiful garden at the back had been preserved. And up at the top of the old house, perhaps dreaming of her youth, was the old woman responsible for keeping the garden: Eve Smith. She was in her eighties then; she'd been a widow longer than I'd been alive.

Chris and I walked through the

French doors in a haze of honeysuckle-scented air on a warm, dry, light September evening, down the rolled green lawn to the narrow, flagstoned paths which wound among the fruit and flower beds, to the wooden gate at the bottom of the garden. There we could stare out onto the great, green empty space of the Harrow playing fields, a great place – I came to learn – to walk and talk, or to run or pace alone, brooding or working out problems, the luxury of wide open spaces in the middle of a city, and the perfect foil for the walled and flowering intimacy of an enclosed garden. In the shadow of the old holm-oak where a pair of wood pigeons nested we turned and looked back at the tall, elegant house, the brick and plaster facade, the green ironwork, the many windows glinting in the setting sun. It seemed like such a romantic place to live.

It was really Chris's first wife who brought them to Ortygia House – she had a job in Harrow, and wanted a flat big enough to hold her piano. Yet when their marriage broke up it was Christopher who stayed, and Christine, with her piano, who left Ortygia House. When he first lived there, only two of the flats were rented out, his own and the one immediately above it. I never met those neighbours, who were in permanent disfavour for their various noisy sins, chief among them a drunken, raucous late-night party. The other two were occupied by other members of the Dawe family: Eve's sister was in the smallest flat, and Flat Number Two was occupied by Eve's younger brother Bobby and his wife Jess.

I returned to England a year later, at the end of 1980, and in April 1981 Chris and I married and bought a cottage in Devon. Although Huddispiitt, the cottage in Devon, was meant to be our home, Chris would not consider giving up the lease on the flat. Although he claimed to be eager to live in the country, he wasn't ready to renounce London. The flat would be our pied-à-terre for occasional visits to the big city. Anyway, he said, it would be incredibly foolish to give it up because if we did



felt

*I'd wandered into
the setting of one
of my favourite books*



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and ever wanted to move back to London we wouldn't be able to afford it. I knew that the rents in Ortygia House were unusually low, but I didn't appreciate it then as much as I did later, having just come from Texas where I'd been renting an entire rambling, if ramshackle, old house in one of the nicest parts of Austin for \$85.00 a month. Although I knew that was less rent than anyone else paid, anywhere, it did kind of spoil me.

The Devon idyll didn't last very long – we were too broke, and Chris was too restless. Rural life didn't suit him. At least once a month we'd pack up the car and return to Ortygia House for a week of visiting friends, eating out, going to the cinema, browsing through bookshops, etc. Towards the end of 1982 we sold the cottage and removed ourselves back to Harrow.

Living in Ortygia House was never meant to be permanent. First of all, of course, it couldn't be. It was a rented flat. Before he met me, Chris had entertained hopes of being able to buy it one day, but after delicately broaching the subject with Mrs. Smith he'd quickly realized that she looked upon the house as a house, as *hers*, no matter how many others might live there. It was not something that could be broken up to be sold off in pieces, but neither was she interested in selling it as a whole. During the London property boom of the 1980s she was called on by a speculator who offered her half a million pounds *in cash*, immediately, for the property as it stood. All she had to do was take the money and move out. She saw him off most indignantly and later tried, with the help of her brother, to get a preservation order on the house next door. But they were too late, and their interest merely decided the new owners of the property to move quickly, and one morning in 1984 Chris and I were awakened by the sound of a wrecking ball smashing the house to bits. A couple of years later, when planning permission was finally granted, a block of modern 'luxury flats' went up in the place of two

houses and two gardens filled with apple trees. By 1984, with Mrs Smith into her 90s, we all knew that her continued existence was the only thing keeping Ortygia House from being razed to the ground.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Christopher Priest was the first writer to live in Ortygia House; eleven years later, along came Lisa Tuttle and then there were two. In 1981 the elderly, ailing Miss Dawe died, and Eve asked us if we knew anyone who might be interested in renting a furnished flat – perhaps a nice young writer, like ourselves. She did like renting to writers. Someone literary, and quiet, who wouldn't play jazz records late at night.

We did know someone – probably several someones, as then, as now, cheap flats were hard to come by in the London area – and we invited Chris Evans to come and have tea with Mrs. Smith. Soon thereafter, by mutual agreement, he moved in upstairs.

The next year our other upstairs neighbours, the disgraced, noisy party givers, moved out, and once again we were asked to recommend a new tenant. This time we thought of an actor friend of ours, John Grillo, who was

that shade, it was incredibly oppressive, like walking into something's stomach) and a bathroom of pillar-box red. We were all broke, so the two Chrises hired themselves out as decorators, and spread layers of Magnolia matt finish on every wall and ceiling.

Impending fatherhood propelled Chris Evans out of Ortygia House and down to Penge in 1984, and into his flat moved Ian Marter, an actor friend of John's. Although primarily an actor, Ian, who once played a continuing part in 'Dr. Who', had also written a couple of 'Dr. Who' books. Sadly, this very sweet and talented man died in 1986 of a sudden, massive heart attack. John Brosnan, who had been "temporarily" camping out in a friend's house for over a year while he searched for a flat he could afford to rent, moved in a few months later: another quiet writer.

Meanwhile, in 1985 my marriage to Chris had come to an end. Although I wasn't entirely happy about staying on in 'his' flat, Chris was in a better position to get a mortgage, whereas I was in no state, either financially or emotionally, for the major upheaval of a move. I decided I'd better stay put until I'd decided where I was going – back to America, or out of London, or into London – and redecorated and gradually began to feel at home. There were drawbacks – the flat was damp and usually cold and the improvements, like a damp course or central heating, which could have cured these problems were too expensive to contemplate – but they were compensated for, I always felt, by the large rooms, the low rent, the beautiful garden (pleasure without responsibility), the location, the neighbours.

When I first got to know her, in 1980, Eve Smith was probably the oldest person I knew. "Nearly ninety!" exclaimed Chris. Yet she was still very active, and her senses had not started to fail. Most of her life seemed bound up with the garden; she was up and down the cast-iron stairs of the fire-escape from her top floor flat several times a day. There was always something to do in the gar-

It was
like walking into
something's stomach

eager to leave Rickmansworth for somewhere 'closer in' to London. He and Eve charmed each other over tea; he swore he never gave parties or listened to jazz, and it was agreed.

But the previous tenants had had the most appalling taste, and the whole flat would have to be redecorated – I recall a bedroom with each wall done in a different colour gloss paint, an orangey-brown dining room (I suspect the colour had been sold as 'terra-cotta' but in practice, with even the ceiling painted

den. Or there were social calls to be paid, or she would drive, rather apprehensively, out in her big car to the shops or the library, or – more confidently – climb the hill to the bank and the butcher-shop and grocer's with a woven basket over one arm. It was a gentle, slow-paced life with lots of time for enjoying small pleasures, and I imagine it was much the same life she had lived for thirty or forty years, only getting a bit slower-paced.

Gradually, though, once she was into her nineties, old age took its inevitable toll, and she became more frail, and both her eyesight and her hearing became impaired – but never her mind. She got rid of her car. Trips downstairs were limited to one a day; eventually, she would appear in the garden only two or three times a week. All of the pleasures of her life became more difficult, sometimes impossible: she could read only books with the largest print, in the brightest of light (electricians came again and again to provide her with better lights); she was too frail to do any gardening at all. She spoke often about the end of life, without self-pity or fear, with a sort of impatience. She was ready to go; each winter she predicted would be her last – but she went on getting older.

In 1988 John Grillo bought his own place and moved out of Ortygia House and Eve asked if I knew anyone who might be interested in renting that flat: another writer, perhaps? As always, I knew plenty of writers, but in 1988 most of them were settled, or saddled, with mortgages. If they were still in rented flats, like John Clute or Bobbie Lamming, they weren't paying much and were unlikely to be tempted by the prospect of moving further out of London. Someone, perhaps John Clute, suggested I ask Colin Greenland, stuck way out there in Essex. Harrow, although also a longish way out of London, was an improvement over Chadwell Heath, it was on the tube, and he would be able to afford it without a roommate. Although he seemed unattracted by the idea of moving when I first approached him, Colin


came out to Harrow to have tea with Eve Smith and when he saw the flat he was hooked. The long room at the back of the flat, with the garden view – the room immediately above my own living room – which John Grillo had used as a bedroom, Colin chose for his office. I've often found that a view can distract me from working, but I hope the sight of the garden inspires him.

In October 1989 another Colin came to Ortygia House when Colin Murray sold his flat in North London and moved in with me. It was to be a temporary measure: we wanted to buy our

own house somewhere far from London, get married, have a baby. Whatever reputation the original Ortygia had as a birthplace, we did not seriously consider having a baby in Ortygia House. We rested there for nearly a year and then, in September 1990, Colin and I, with Emily, migrated north to Scotland.

I was unable to find another writer willing and able to move into my old flat, so after we'd gone it was rented by the doctor for the Harrow School, my former GP, Patrick Kaye.

After we moved, Eve's younger brother, Bob Dawe, died; his widow moved into a nursing home, and their flat is now occupied by another writer, Jessica Palmer. With Jessica, Colin, and John still living in Ortygia House, the tradition continues, yet we all know that the end of an era came when Eve Smith died this year, just short of reaching her 100th birthday. What will happen now? Will her heirs continue to subsidize the existence of impecunious writers? Will they upgrade, and up the rents? Or will they sell the place to the highest bidder... who will knock it down and put up another block of expensive flats in its place? If so, another little bit of history, and beauty, will vanish.

When I lived in Austin back in the 1970s some of my friends had a tradition of gathering on Halloween to read aloud ghost stories, most of them written especially for the occasion. I imported that tradition to Ortygia House, and every year that I lived there invited a smallish gathering of friends to write and read their own spooky tales aloud. So many good stories were produced for those annual evenings – a few of them, astonishingly, never published – that I once talked with Chris Evans about publishing a limited edition volume of "Tales from Ortygia House." Well, it never happened, but I still like to think that it might, just as I hope that Ortygia House itself, despite the ruthless demolition in the past of its neighbours on either side, will continue to stand, and even to provide a home for more writers in the future, outliving us all. 

Tales from Ortygia House:

The following is a list, by no means complete, of some of the books written within the walls of Ortygia House, 6 Lower Road, Harrow, during the past two decades:

by Christopher Priest

The Inverted World
The Space Machine
A Dream of Wessex¹
An Infinite Summer
The Affirmation¹
The Glamour¹

by Lisa Tuttle

Angela's Rainbow
Encyclopedia of Feminism
Heroines
Memories of the Body
Lost Futures

by Christopher Evans

In Limbo

by John Brosnan

The Primal Screen
The Skylords
War of the Skylords
The Fall of the Skylords
Bedlam¹ (as by Harry Adam Knight)

by Colin Greenland

Take Back Plenty
Harm's Way

Notes:

- 1 Set the year Evelyn Dawe Smith was born
- 2 The Dream Archipelago is "a kind of fusion of the Channel Islands and Greece, with bits of Harrow-on-the-Hill and St. Tropez thrown in for good measure."
- 3 Set in Harrow



ORTYGIA



eeding to move to the north-west part of London, my then wife and I advertised in local papers for an apartment: "WRITER AND WIFE REQUIRE 3-ROOM FLAT". Strictly speaking it should have said "STUDENT TEACHER AND HUSBAND", even though I had just finished *Indoctrinaire*, but it did the trick. The outgoing resident of the garden flat at Ortygia House rang up straight away, and two weeks later we were in. It was May 1969. The rent was £350 a year, cheap even for those days. In the years to come the low rent was a major factor in my ability to stay afloat as a freelance.

With the low rent came concomitant status: I never hit it off with the landlady, a septuagenarian High Tory of deceptively frail appearance who saw the incursion of tenants into the lower floors of her house as a fall from social grace. From the start I was treated with disdain and suspicion, and I learnt to keep out of her way. An indicator of my lowly station came shortly after I moved in. Because I worked at the back of the house, in a peaceful room next to the garden, I failed to hear the arrival of a team of tree surgeons to pollard the limes that stood beside the road. When I went out at lunchtime I found my car quite literally buried under a pile of branches. One of the workmen told me cheerfully that the landlady had directed them to dump them there. (This depressing incident had a lot to do with my story 'The Head and the Hand', written soon after.)

Aggravations aside, the flat was a congenial place to live. The rooms were large and light and laid out eccentrically in an L-shape. Although a


main road ran past the front door, at the back of the house was a classical English flower garden crammed with red-hot pokers, peonies, begonias; a Zephirine Drouhin rose planted in 1926 climbed the four-storey walls at the back and finally reached the roof during the last summer I was there. The immense lawn was sprinkled illegally throughout every day of the 1976 drought. At the end of the garden was a private gate to the Harrow School cricket grounds, unused for most of the year and therefore a place for many solitary and productive walks. One day I stood in the centre of the field and stared across the flat ground at the gentle conical mound of Harrow Hill, topped with its church steeple. It reminded me of an idea I had had some years earlier, about a world that had become mathematically reversed. I began work on *Inverted World* a week or two later.

I think it must have been my long hair that rubbed the landlady the wrong way, because otherwise I was a model tenant. The flat had not been decorated for many years before I moved in, and I renovated most of it while I was there. I left the large hallway to last: it was full of mould and the plaster was crumbling. I repaired it all, painted it white, put down a carpet and filled it with plants, making it into one of the most pleasant parts of the flat... but the grudging reaction of the landlady was a

blight on the spirit. Soon afterwards I took my quiet revenge, and reworked the experience in *The Affirmation*.

Ortygia House was just the place I lived, and for most of my time had no particular literary or artistic associations. That started to change when Christopher Evans moved into the flat above me; soon afterwards the writer/actor John Grillo took another apartment on the same floor. (I learned what it is like to live close to a writer. Chris was writing one of his novels, and I could hear his typewriter working all day. I found it a soothing sound, not at all disruptive. One night it was going as I fell asleep; it was still hammering on when I woke the next morning.) After Chris Evans moved out his place was taken by another actor, Ian Marter, best known for his rôle as one of Doctor Who's assistants. Ian once advised me to wax my car, because he said it would help strengthen it in the event of a head-on collision (or, presumably, of a falling tree branch).

I left in 1985, having lived in the house longer than I had at any other address. I wrote most of my novels there, from *Fugue* to *The Glamour*.

I was sorry to forsake the tranquil physical environment of the house, but glad to be away from the other pressures. I felt them more keenly than others who have lived there since, but perhaps this was simply because I was the first. 

ORTYGIA

Jessica Palmer

I ... want ... to ... be ... three ... little ... bits ... of ... grass. Plants are innocent – unlike people. They do not carry the baggage of mortal existence. Each winter sees slumber and sleep followed by the wakefulness and activity of summer. Each year, the dying back, succeeded by regeneration. Far better that, than this slow dwindling death and decay when one's time has been outlived and usefulness has ceased.

I would not need to be anything fancy or frivolous or grand...

"...like a rosebush. Not just three little blades of grass, Mrs. Smith." What twaddle! The young man, sitting in attendance upon the old woman, bends over his book not knowing what to say. "You could be anything you wanted..."

...to be dead and gone. To have the cares and burdens of human existence far behind me. Better still, never experienced. Instead, I wait for death, with this dear child keeping me company.

What did he say about a rosebush? No, if I had a choice, I would prefer to be three little blades of grass. But we were speaking of wants, and how many people get what they want out of life. I never wanted to wait for death, to watch others go before me until only I was left. Solitary and alone. I've buried two husbands and all my brothers and sisters. And my friends. Right about now even an enemy's face would be welcome if we shared the same memories and the same experiences.

Instead, I sit waiting for breath to withdraw, for the spark of human life to exit this hollow shell. Confined to bed with nothing but my memories, and tolerant youngsters – gazing on, uncomprehending, saying unhelpful things as the young often do. Foolish things such as the young are prone to, when they desire to please or appease. Wanting to help, but not knowing what to do. Wishing...

...she could live forever. I sit here next to the bed, viewing her body so bent by age, and I know that this wish is cruel. But I don't want things to change.

I've been happy here. Really happy. Sometimes, it seems that I only existed before I came here. I have thrived. Success, what little I have of it, has come to me since I moved to Ortygia. Everything good that has happened to me, has occurred since I moved into this house four years ago. I don't want this to change. But how can things help but change once she is gone?

Yet the changes are happening all around me. I cannot stop them. All I can do is observe them, and rue them.

Back in my flat, the crack in the wall is getting bigger. Once it was just a thin line that appeared near the floor. Slowly, it has inched up the wall until it reached the ceiling. Now it has completed a long curve, is worming its way back down again. A reflection of the bent visage of the woman on the bed before me. As if they were somehow bound. The house and the woman.

I know she cannot last forever, and if she goes I'm afraid that all my good fortune will disappear with her. The matriarch, lordling over this house...

...is sandwiched almost magically between the burgeoning madness which is Harrow and its poorer cousin South Harrow, an island of serenity in the middle of the teeming exurban sprawl.

Called Ortygia, it was christened after the island home of the Muses by its original owner, who was I believe a Greek Master at Harrow School. Built in the reign of Victoria, at the base of the Hill where the boyish laughter of Shelley and Byron once rang and where perhaps their ghosts walk still, in half-forgotten dream of misspent youth. Or so I am told, but



I don't know for sure.

Through the years, the house has evolved, as all living things must when they age. It has seen with time's passage, economies change, governments once ruled by old nobility fall, and the war to end all war pass only to return in a new and more virulent form. The original owner moved, or died, or merely faded away. The servants left, one assumes to find a more remunerative employment elsewhere, and the house, itself, was divided into flats. And yet it lost none of its grandeur. It has aged much like wine, cheese or a fine old Scotch, improving rather than disintegrating. Until it has achieved a state of eccentric, if somewhat dilapidated, elegance. Its leaden pipes sing of days gone by – when they were new and the haute of modern convenience. Lorries hurtling along the A312 provide percussive counterpoint, rattling the windows in the sashes and shaking the house all the way down to its foundation.

Still Ortygia stands unperturbed, maintaining the aura of country gentility, aided no doubt by the presence of the playing fields of John Lyons School. But more than that, dignity is the essence of the building itself, surrounded by sleepy gardens and noisy boyhood ebullience. It speaks of cucumber sandwiches and late afternoon teas, learned discussions and erudite debate.

And I, its newest resident, am so glad to be here. To be back to civilisation after the wilds of Shropshire. I'm not much for sheep. Who cares that this is a drafty place in the best traditions of old homes? I don't even have to get out of bed in order to see which way the prevailing winds are on any given day, I have only to stick a moistened finger above the duvet and wait until the next gust blasts down the chimney or teases its way through the cracks that grace its walls like wrinkles on an old woman...

...expecting death to come at any minute.

It's terrible to be old. All I have left is this house, this room and the nurse who waits with me. And memories of brighter days. The parties. The dances. There have been lots of laughter and joy within this house. Lots of tears too.

I remember the day when my husband first brought me here. The world was still a bright and shiny place. I fell in love with the old forecourt where carriages, harness and bit once jangled, announcing the arrival of visitors. Later my sister moved in and then my brother Bobby and his wife Jessamine. I remember the time when Eton played Harrow upon this pitch. We watched the game from the roof, and when it was done, we invited both teams up for strawberries fresh from the garden...

...is overgrown now. Although you can still see the shadow of old magnificence in the arboreal tunnel that leads under a lacy fretwork of leaves to a sun-dappled rose garden. Its formal lines blurred as it fights for survival against the encroachment of weeds. The path winds to a broken-down gate that leans forlornly askew and looks out over the cricket

pitch where the boys dress as they did years ago and one could forget time's passage and the vagaries of current youth, sporting inexplicable hairstyles and shocking clothes.

The windows fit poorly in their sashes, sliding awry so that they rest at odd angles, leaving the beholder to believe he has fallen through the looking glass into Wonderland. When gazing through the canted panes, one can envision the white rabbit – clad in waistcoat, his pocket watch in his hand – scampering across the lawn, hurrying to wait upon the queen.

The view is restful. To the East, the church spire reaches for the heavens, standing above the trees as though to command God's attention and blessing for the righteous within the sacred precincts of Harrow School. To the West, night steals slowly across the horizon. A blanket of ruby red and deepest indigo. The city appears like sparkling jewels or fairy lights across the undulating curve of hills, and the Piccadilly line speeds past in the distanced, so small it resembles a child's toy and so soft its roar is muffled and muted.

And time stands still...

...keeping me here? To remain when all the rest have gone. Sometimes, it seems that life and time mock me. Taunt me. I look at my reflection in the mirror, and I wonder whose image is this? This woman with her skin as thin as parchment and blue veins clearly visible under ghostly white flesh. This is not the face I knew. Their cheeks sunk so hollow, that the head appears a skull grinning back at me. Once my hair fell down to my knees. And what is this cap of straw that has replaced it?

And then I am glad that I am half-blind and cannot see myself too clearly...

...I should tell somebody about the crack. It grows daily, a little longer, a little wider. Even as I watch, so like Mrs Smith who ages before me, her body bent, until it appears she is almost as old as the house itself. Her voice as cracked and dry as Ortygia's mortar. Her eyes inflated by thick spectacles into two watery moons that float upon a film of tears.

Yet her mind is clear. Unless as happens sometimes, she chooses to wander to fairer fields still peopled with the family and friends of her youth.

I've learned to love her, although I cannot say she has a heart of gold, for gold is as cold as it is soft and malleable, and she is none of these things. Sturdy, strong, and I can hope, eternal.

Although her musculature hangs from her bones like a threadbare and reluctant cloak. Reluctant to relinquish its sad mistress and even more reluctant, it seems, to release hold on life, and inside the spirit burns brightly still...

...I wish I could see my garden. At times like this, I wish that my bedroom weren't at the front of the house but at the back. I tell myself that maybe someday, when I'm feeling better, I'll go outside and walk again along the paths, but I



am fooling myself. Perhaps I'll ask to have my bed moved so that I can at least view it as a blur of lovely green, and then I can pretend that I'm three little blades of grass...

...why grass? And why three? The woman's spirit is indomitable. I admire and respect her. She deserves better than this slow ebbing of life.

She's the type of woman for whom the word 'dowager' was created. I can't imagine this place without her. So the crack in my kitchen grows and she dwindles and sometimes it seems that I fade with...

...Her! There's the woman from number three at the top of the road. Oh, god, I can't talk to her. She smiles a lot, and her smile rings false. No-one can be that happy all the time, and she doesn't sound like she's all that happy when I listen to her banging away in the flat above me. She's disgustingly friendly.

I know, I'll cross the street to avoid her. Maybe she won't notice me. My God, she calls to me even still. Damn! You'd think she would take the hint!

Doesn't she understand that I like my solitude and my privacy? Enough so that I rarely leave the house during the day, wandering about at night. I don't bother anybody, and I prefer if they wouldn't bother me. I'm not Colin.

I'm not her friend. I do not know her. I'm not sure I want to. She is just another face, a neighbour, maybe but I want to be left alone. Undisturbed as I have been in the past. I've lived at Ortygia longer than anybody else. I've seen more than enough changes, and I don't like them. I use to be able to disappear into my flat, safe from interference. The old woman respected my privacy and, the house itself was immutable, unmovable...

...no-one should live to be so old, and I do not want to go owing any.

"What was that you said, Colin? I can't remember. Ah my mind wanders so..."

...like phantoms up and down the hall. As I walk through the dining room, I can well imagine sleepy ghosts moving about here and there. Sometimes, it almost seems I can hear the shades of former residents, who once loved here, lived here, dreamed here, and died here.

Someday, I would like to write a story about this place. As its newest resident, I suppose that would be presumptuous. It's a shame that no-one has done so in the past. There's a story here. Several stories, in fact. But where would I begin? How would I present it? What...

...is happening here? Where am I?

"Who are you? I don't know you. You don't belong in my flat. Oh, you're cleaning. That's alright. I haven't been able to do much of that myself lately. I've spent so much of my time looking after Jessamine.

I feel so strange. So different... Look at my hands? The liver spots are gone. The arthritis. They are young; they are strong. Oh my God, I'm dead..."

...and gone. The dead are more real to me now than the living. I see my brother Bobby tarrying at my bedside, eagerly awaiting me so we can dance again as we did in the past.

And they are young. Further in the corner, a dark presence looms. Someday it will leap out and it will get me.

"Colin! No, don't go over there where..."

"...is Jess? What have you done to my wife? Where have you taken her?

"Wait a second. You can hear me? You say, you mean no harm? You need a place to stay for a little while. What do I care? I have no use for this flat anymore. But I must get through to Jess, and you, if indeed you can hear, must help me. I need you to carry a message..."

...! This is ridiculous. What am I doing here in this nursing home, talking to this woman? And what sort of message is this? I look at her feet, and I feel a right part. Her legs are so swollen it's obvious that they haven't conveyed her anywhere, in more than an enthusiastic shuffle, for years. How can she dance?

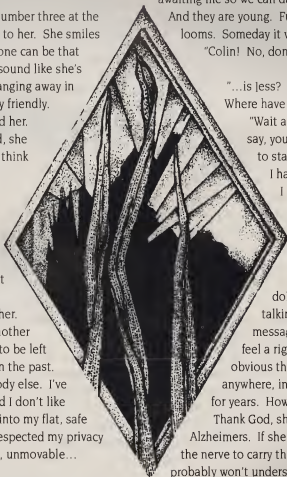
Thank God, she sleeps. Than God, she has Alzheimers. If she didn't, I don't think I would have the nerve to carry this message. Even if she wakes, she probably won't understand what I say.

I take her hand. It is cold, so cold. I bend over to place my lips right next to her ear so no-one else will hear, and I tell her what I was bidden to say: "Bobby sent me. He had a message. He said: 'you will be dancing together soon'."

Two days later, she dies...

...less is gone. The last responsibility which ties me here is past. I need no longer worry about her. I can release my hold on earth. Yet, I hope this house will not end with me, for I worry about my writers.

I like writers. Their heads remain fixed in the clouds while their feet barely skim the surface of terra firma as they chase after some unwitting flight of fancy or, if you prefer the more poetic, Muse. They are quiet and rarely bother me. Each lives in a separate world, so that at any one time, there's an



infinite number of universes going on under this one roof.

What will become of them after I'm gone? For I almost view them as my children, extensions of myself, each revealing different aspects of myself. The girl, an American. She's moved now. She lived in flat one. What was her name again? She was forever exploring, and deploring, human relationships, the role of women in society. And haven't I wondered about that myself? During my marriages and after. And after careful consideration, I decided to live alone and independent, rather than restrict myself with another husband. Not that I can complain of how my husbands treated me, but I was forever forced to submit my needs to theirs. Was this not what society expected of me?

It seems she at least has found fulfilment in her role, or I hope she has. She is free now, for she has left with her husband and her baby. The mother I was never meant to be, fulfilling the dream I was never meant to possess, with my first husband dying so young and my second sick so much of the time.

Then there's the other young man. Shy fellow. Oh, why can't I remember any names? I never see him. He keeps to himself, as though isolation were some kind of defence against man and reality. I respect his privacy. Even understand it. Have not I retreated from the world, too? And my world grows ever smaller as time goes by.

And Colin? That gentle, little boy. Sometimes, I find myself looking at him and wishing ... the child I never had. Certainly, I would have been proud to have such a son. He has been as deferential and considerate of my ailing and my ageing as any son could have been.

And there's the new one... another American... another child. The two of them, Colin and her, are like two sides of a coin. One light, one dark. although I don't know the young woman very well. She's so new. She writes children's books, I believe. Wild. Vibrant. And I see myself in another day. Hardened by life and more competent than most, but still young and hopeful. Still expectant and expecting. Defiant against what life has given for me. Yes, I can see myself in her too...

...Bobby and Jessamine are gone, and Mrs. Smith will follow. What else has she got to keep her here? And, looking at my wall I realise that soon I'll be able to see light through the crack without opening the curtain or looking out the window...

...is closed. Just returned from my nightly outing, I freeze in the courtyard, raise my hand to cover my eyes from the sight and remove it, hoping that some trick of reflection or light has deceived me.

Mrs. Smith never closes that window. This is not a good sign...

...something is happening here. Something strange. First I see Bobby, a man I've never met, and now it's my late

husband. As if the house has crawled inside my mind, resurrecting the spirits of the dead. Once I thought of this place as an inspiration, but now I'm not so sure.

Ortygia has lived up to the name. This home to the Muses also has housed a series of writers of which I am but the lowliest and most recent resident. Many are the stories that have been written here. The great, the good and the not-so-good. Some have received awards and others go unrecognised.

Sometime, it seems that I am not the creator of what I write, but rather that the stories have written me. Or perhaps the house dreams me.

Could it be true? No, I won't believe it. I had a life once, apart from here, didn't I? I had a childhood, a husband. Hope and dreams. Could it be that it's all caprice and did, in fact, never exist?

I feel so faint, as though I were a shadow. Even as I write this the wall begin to fade, becoming vague and indistinct. Or is it I that wavers? When I look upon my arms, I see that they are hazy and insubstantial. The skin, veins, blood and myriad of little bones which make up the human hand become transparent so that the paper is visible through my flesh and I know that I fade too. Only the figment of the great dowager's imagination...

"Maggie, I can't get through to Colin. I keep getting a recording telling me that the number doesn't exist."

"What about Jessica? She lives directly above him. Maybe she can take a message..."

"I tried that and got some old woman who keeps insisting that she has had this number for years..."

The house, without its living heart, stands empty now of all save memories that have seeped their way into the wood, mortar and stone. The recollected whisper of human voices ring hollowly throughout the halls. Words once spoken. Promises made, some kept, some not. Occasionally, an expletive rustles through the still air, along with the ghostly echo of a computerised burp as a story is digested whole.

A truck roars by; the windows rattle protest. Then the house settles with a lumbering groan. The crack in 2A widens, letting in a single mote of sun. And out on the lawn three blades of grass lift verdant heads to the sun...



Author's note: This story is respectfully dedicated to Mrs. Eve Smith, in hope that the memory that was Ortygia House, if not the tradition, will survive her passing.

A fictionalised account and purely a bit of my own dementia, it is not necessarily an accurate reflection of its occupants. At least, I don't think any of Ortygia's residents are looking particularly transparent. If, however, the next time you see any of us we appear to be getting a little fuzzy around the edges...

The Emergence of the Mammoth

Pages from
the Diary of
Colin Greenland

Mon 27 Jun 1988

Space opera is the climax myth of the industrial age. We react to its obsolescence in various ways: me by adopting it as material I can now use. Cyberpunk, properly, would be the sf of the information age.

Tue 27 Oct

My new landlady stands at the top of the steps to her flat, at the top of the house. She is erect, majestically kindly, 91. 'I shall call you Colin,' she says, 'and you must call me Mrs Smith.'

Wed 28 Oct

She used to have a splendid vegetable garden. She used to own half the residential property in Harrow on the Hill, give tennis parties, drive a carriage and pair, go to every new play in London. How she is climbing precariously on a chair to put rusting tins of fruit and not-very-washed crockery back in her larder. I am not allowed to do it for her or even help. I must sit at the kitchen table and help myself, to whisky and soda. Even this is a shame to her, because I am a tenant, a guest, and should be entertained properly in the sitting room, with napkins and a tray and so forth.

She used to be a great reader, when she could see. Above all writers she prizes Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Johnson.

'When I'm gone, you can think of me up there, conversing with

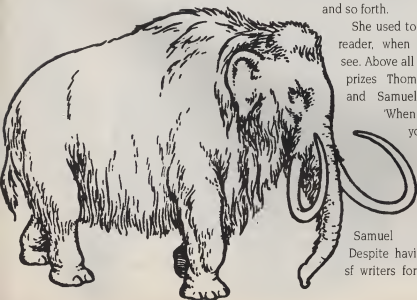
Samuel Johnson.'
Despite having housed
sf writers for nearly 20

years, she doesn't approve of science fiction, because she thinks it's conducive to space travel. 'We can't even manage this planet, let alone putting a lot of people in a rocket and sending them to another.'

Mon 15 May 1989

Take Back Plenty, ch.61. Decide most of what I produced on Fri was wrong. Cut it and do a bit better: S, T & x riding down the tractor beams to the Capellan flagship. Afterwards, take Liz upstairs to tea with Mrs S.

It seems entirely right and proper, in this house, to sit down here writing about spaceships, then go up for tea with a woman who recalls seeing Blériot in 1909. The school hired a charabanc and took them down for the day – she says to Sussex, but I think she means Kent. No one knew when the intrepid aviator would arrive, so they were permitted to play, and fly kites. 'And then he came! The plane was going very slowly. I could see his face, quite clearly. I can see it now. And the chair he was sitting in, an ordinary kitchen chair. He was tied in with ropes.' Mrs S looks upwards, her half-blind eyes filled with a light from another age.



ORTYGINA



57

Thu 25 Oct 1990

Woken by sound of electric saw: a man up a ladder pollarding the two lime trees whose branches in summer fill my front window with a prospect of leaves. They have no branches now. After Lisa moving out yesterday, it seems too much. Sunny morning. On my way out to post, pass Mr Dawe on the steps. He reassures me about the trees: they've been pollarded before, many times over the years, as in fact anyone can see. And they will grow back, in fact better. But in the interim, he says, 'a gaunt outlook'.

Mon 26 Oct 1992

The painkillers confuse her sadly. For some reason the nurse spreading her napkin across the sheet for tea makes her think we are going to play bridge, which she used to do a lot. Later she wants to know who the man was who was here when I arrived, 'with navy blue trousers'. There was no man.

'How many more years do you think I'll live?' she asks me confidentially, in a moment of lucidity and calm. I have a standard answer to this problem: a hundred years more, I tell her, by which time the doctors will have worked out how to grow her a new leg and give her back her sight.

Mon 2 Nov

Mrs S convinced there are a lot of people in her bedroom, all with cups and saucers. She insists I do the washing up before I start to read to her, then tries to get out of bed to check if I truly have or am only pretending, to humour her. 'I keep thinking something's going to make a great roar, she says, pointing over to her right, between me and the bedside cabinet. Like a lion? I suggest. 'Yes.' I tell her I won't let it eat her. Is it Death, appearing? One might have expected it on the left. Sometimes she sees it as a woman: 'Who is that woman? Sitting on that chair?' Read her some more of the collected correspondence of Evelyn Waugh and Lady Diana Cooper. She stops me early, because the letters are becoming

too miserable now that we are nearing the end of the book, too full of illnesses and the loss of friends.

Wed 10 Feb 1993

Good and promising meeting at Harper Collins about *Harm's Way*. Jane Johnson and Victoria Singer have come up with the wacky idea of launching it with a Victorian tea party at Scarborough during Mexican. They are talking – horror – about fancy dress. I smile and go along, on the principle that when a publisher is enthusiastic and actually proposing to do something for your book, you go along. I admit, 'I'd rather give tea to fans in Scarborough than Muscadet to hacks in Soho.'

I played the Dormouse once in a school production of the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. Decide not to mention this.

Thu 11 Feb

'It's been an age since I've seen you,' Mrs S laments. In fact it was Tuesday. Time for her now is an eternity of boredom and anxiety. Wonder how much of what I read to her helps. Sometimes she lies there and lets the stream of words wash over her. But when, in Barbara Pym's *Crampton Hodnet*, Francis Cleveland kisses Barbara Bird, she gasps: 'Oh! You're shocking me!'

She requests: 'Wish for my death,' the way a religious person would say 'Pray for me.' I tell her as usual I can't, I'm too selfish, valuing her company too highly to relinquish it – but for the first time I wonder. If we were characters in some fantasy novel and it was only my will keeping her alive, could I let her go now? Yes; I could.

Fri 2 Apr

Mrs Smith on really good form today: sitting up, paying attention, drinking a second cup of tea. 'What have you been doing today?' I ask her.

She screws up her face. 'Nothing,' she says, disgusted. 'Worrying.'

Wed 14 Apr

'We can't have any more reading until I'm better.'

Wed 19 May

With Rob Holdstock and Jane Johnson to speak to three dozen local librarians in Rookery Hall, Cheshire. Mostly women, of course. They like my reading from HW, about life on Mars; they like me telling them to help themselves to the pre-publication copies on display and they all queue up for our signatures. 'I don't usually invite authors to speak at our library,' one tells me at lunch, 'because they expect to be treated like VIP's.' I say 'I'll go anywhere for a pizza and the price of the train.'

Home to find a strange light falling down the stairs, as though the roof had been taken away. A note from Jessica on the kitchen table: 'Colin, my love, sit down before you read this. Eve passed away at 8 a.m.' I, normally abed till 9 or 10, was already up and gone at that hour, meeting the others at Euston. Two days after my 39th birthday, the day before publication of my fifth novel. All these measurements suggest themselves, as though to fix death in a private system of time, the last appointment on our calendar.

Call the relatives, her niece and great-niece, who are fine, calm, coping. I say: 'A superstitious gloom has come over me. Everything has gone so well for me since I've been here. I feel as if a benevolent supernatural being has been hovering, literally over my head. Now she's gone and my book will fail and everything will go wrong.' Caroline says: 'I'm sure the vibes will go on for a while.' It seems an odd word for someone as cool and precise as her: vibes. Lie in the bath, remembering Eve: waves of sorrow, amusement, affection, admiration.

She
doesn't approve of science
fiction, because she thinks it's
conducive to space travel



ORTY
GIA



Thu 20 May

'The end of an era,' everyone keeps saying. My good fortune to have lived under that reign; and prospered. It seems almost natural, at Ortygia House.

When I look out of the windows, the objects in view – the limes on the forecourt, the glowing green lawn – seem to be receding from each other, as if detached from some fundamental cosmic structure by the failure of its key principle.

Sat 5 June

Fine morning. While Ellen and I are getting ready to go out and meet Roz I come up with the idea for a new lost race/Hollow Earth fiction – recursive sf – the way that imagery would work in the post-colonial, politically correct age: revering the lost cultures of obliterated indigenes – mysterious and luminous and funny and bizarre like a Peter Carey short story. 'For god's sake don't tell Roz,' I beg Ellen. 'She'll be all over it.'

Sat 12 June

Write to Sherry C in Texas: The house is quite different already: as if somebody had taken the roof off, or pulled out some vital members from the walls. The garden is suddenly wild, the overgrowth impassable. Time is starting to seep in.'

Fri 9 Jul

On R4, Christina Dodwell talks about Siberia, revealing that the word mammoth' is the Siberian *mammod*, meaning 'earth beast'. The biggest ever found was 4 metres tall. They were believed to live underground: earthquakes were caused by their herds in motion. Light and air were poisonous to them, which was why they were always found trapped in the ice in attitudes of terror and wrath, overcome at the instant of their accidental emergence.

Fri 23 Jul

To Horthwick Park Hospital for chest x-ray. Another waiting outpatient is getting upset: 'All them people that's just gone in, I was here before all of them.' His wife tries to calm him down: 'Stop making a fuss,' she says, turning the pages of her *You* magazine. But he seethes. 'Why don't they do what's right?' he says. 'What's right's right.' The radiographer, a tall, thin black, very aloof, comes out to make him sit down. Sits beside him, politely explaining procedure; but he will have none of it. He thinks the man is saying the other patients are so seriously ill their x-rays cannot wait a moment. 'All them people might have cancer, but you don't know what I've got,' he

interrupts, with perfect logic. 'My doctor doesn't know what I've got.' All at once I see his indignation differently; as fear.

Tue 31 Aug


Barry Traish, tidying up after Lunicon, sends me some stuff trawled out of the SF Lovers' conference on Usenet. Lenore Levine writes: 'Subject: Ignore the Bimbo on the Cover.

'Now that I've got your attention I would like to recommend *Harm's Way*, by Colin Greenwood. This sf novel operates under some unusual premises: that is, instead of taking 'modern' science as the jumping-off point, it takes nineteenth (?) century scientific ideas. That is, the solar system is spanned by ships which sail the aether between the planets.

'The plot of the novel also resembles a nineteenth century novel..., with a lovely and innocent heroine who undergoes picaresque adventures, and foils the bad guys in the end. Not a Nebula winner, by any means; but definitely worth your five bucks.'

A message from a strange and distant world: ambiguous, dispiriting and encouraging in equal measure.

Garden now looking half restored. Jamie the new gardener speaks of cutting everything back: 'Let some light into the place,' he says vigorously.

'Make some space!' 



ORTYGIA

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A READER WRITES:

Is There Such A Thing As Green Toilet Paper?

I was talking to a bunch of librarians once, about the books I write for children - and I got into a discussion with the readies in the group. (You've heard of foodies, people who don't just want to eat food, they want to know about it: they relish interesting tastes, compare food experiences? Readies are people who feel the same about printed fiction). We were throwing classic titles and names of writers around pretty freely. I was agreeing enthusiastically that I'd been influenced by this, deliberately 'quoting' from that... One of the non-readies in the audience took exception, stood up and asked me didn't I think I was being elitist? What about the people who haven't read all these other books? What are they supposed to do with a subtle reference to something that happens in a novel by George MacDonald?

Because I remember this question, I know I must have answered it feebly. I think I said something like, the books are on the shelves read 'em. I'm not stopping you. And don't blame me if George MacDonald bores your socks off... I should have told her that it's impossible for a writer to refrain from referring to things outside the reader's experience. It's my life, not yours, dear reader. If you want to get boiled-up about my sneaky, secretive ways, the material that relates to books I've read or movies I've seen (and maybe you haven't) is the minuscule tip of the iceberg. What about that holiday in Norfolk when I was thirteen? You weren't there, were you? Heheheh. You'll never know what use of that experience I've made in my fiction. You'll never know even if I tell you, because anything I tell anyone about where my ideas come from is a tissue of lies: I am, after all, a liar by trade...

Stealing from other forms of fiction is an essential part of the creative process, and I

get annoyed when my right to steal is questioned. We're all part of the great edifice of literature - what am I supposed to do, invent this stuff out of thin air? It strikes me as unfair - when I'm accused of being knowledgeable about my own business. This doesn't happen in pop music! So long as you can avoid lawsuits, the audience gives you respect, not resentment, for ripping off the greats on CD. The kids don't refuse to hum along, on the grounds that they are being fed riffs invented (or stolen!) by a man called Jimi Hendrix, who died before they were born... I do not expect the kids who read my children's books to go through the text picking out literary allusions, and fill in a score card at the end. Absolutely not! The allusions are there because reading is part of my experience, same as that holiday in Norfolk. And it's a personal experience. It is my reading of George MacDonald that seeps through into the pages of my writing, not yours. I'm always ready to discuss my sources with other readies. But these discussions, though fun, are deceptive. In the end, my references are nobody's business but mine. Or at least, that's how it ought to be.

Reviewing books that have been reviewed before is a different process from doing the first job. It's much more relaxed. The work has been done. You don't need to be dissecting the text as you go, trying to decide exactly what is going on. You don't have to be snuffling out those ready-references to other books, that the average reader might miss. You're free to respond to the surface, to enjoy or fail to enjoy. The four books I reviewed for this issue of *Nexus* all came into this category. In each case I'd seen a review, or at least assimilated the concept: and in each case I'd decided that sounds like a good read. And the four books - *Sign For The Sacred*, *Mortal Mask*, *A Taste Of Blood Wine*, and *Genevieve Undead* are all works of popular genre fiction, which means that my non-readie librarian's complaint would have to

be laughed out of court. The term genre in that description means that the book, or whatever work of art is in question, is supposed to be a tissue of allusions. If you're writing in a genre you have to keep to the formula: a formula based on the contents of other books. Whether you do it consciously, unconsciously or tongue in cheek, the only way to write something that is clearly and quickly recognisable as horror or a western, is to refer, constantly and on every level, to other books of the same kind. That's what genre fiction is about. Science fiction, for instance, has been a palimpsest of stolen riffs from its most innocent youth, and has made a proud virtue of the fact. Hence, the (all too) popular belief that only sf readers can read sf: that you can't possibly understand sf unless you've already read lots of it beforehand.

Genre fiction is supposed to be self-referential (as they call it in joined-up language). Because everyone seems to agree on this, I've always held that it is ridiculous to criticise a genre novel for being derivative. But leaving aside the Storm Constantine's *Sign For The Sacred*, which is rather a different kind of writing, the other three books I read this time confirmed me in the opinion I formed last issue, when I was looking at genre fantasy. Something has gone wrong with the process.

The productification of genre fiction had to bland things out. The books must be more like each other: the hero's name must be chosen from this list; the decor must be chosen from our House Style tone card. Such is capitalism, it can't be helped; there are ways to stay alive inside the machine. And I know that if there's a kind of fiction I like to consume (it won't be a book) in an undemanding passive-audience style (it'll be some ludicrous TV 'detective' series, like *Poirot*, or *Murder She Wrote*) I'll be most

STORM CONSTANTINE

Sign For The Sacred
1993, Headline, TPB, £8.99, 373p

An imagined world location, and a detached style of reportage for this examination of that old Rock Star Messiah phenomenon. The names are rich pickings as usual, and redolent of Gormenghast: Wakelate the poisoner, Perpetuals Sleeve, the surprisingly likeable chief honcho of the oppressive religion. The Messiah is a pleasingly recalcitrant figure: divine or just pouty? are those really miracles? The book refuses to say. But the separate stories barely manage to meet up. The Messiah phenomenon is portrayed in cool fragments, we never get close enough to feel the heat. The lasting impression is of a series of arresting vignettes: the three wild witch-maidens at the mill in the forest; Dauntless Javelot's peculiar idea of fun, Chasteless the automaton whore, soul-alive in her rotting patchwork body. A book to be read by those who love Storm Constantine's idea of beauty, and for the fun of meeting extravagant characters with night-club names, who talk in downright commonsense and grizzle like Monday morning when the quest gets tough.

Editor's note:

Gwyneth wrote this article in response to a request for reviews and commentary on the fantasy genre as she found it in the books reviewed. The reviews, which ought to have appeared in the review section of *Nexus* 4, have been included here to provide a context.

Gwyneth Jones

FREDA WARRINGTON: *A Taste of Blood Wine* 1992; Pan Fantasy, TPB, £8.99, 446p
In the decade after the Great War, the three lovely daughters of a Cambridge scientist fall for his new assistant, mysterious and gorgeous Karl von Wultendorff. Of course Charlotte the shy, sulky clever one is going to be the star. Of course Karl – a struggling Viennese musician in Mozart's day until he met Kristian, the king of the vampires – will fall in love with his prey. It's clear that Freda Warrington is in love with the classic Hammer Horror tableau: and the decor, the clothes, the drugs and glitz of twenties high-society. There's also a plot. Vampires have a world of their own – the Crystal Ring. The King of the Vampires believes he is God's curse on the wicked. Karl regards vampirism as a hideous disease and is looking for a way to kill the King but so far Kristian's mastery of the Crystal Ring has defeated him. *A Taste of Blood Wine* suggests we compare the carnage of the Great War with the vampire phenomenon, and proposes vampires are really the creatures of our collective nightmare. Which is too close to metaphor for a truly loving tribute: and there's something slightly wacky about a vampire deciding another vampire has Got To Be Stopped – be cause he's a dangerous religious fanatic. *A Taste of Blood Wine* is a serious book: it sometimes felt like a chunk of solemn blood-bolstered Mills & Boon, with a rather good joke trying to get out. But the poetry of Freda Warrington's writing puts it at cut above the not-another-vampire-book heap. Yes, there's going to be a series. Vol 2 may well be in your bookshops now

indignant if anyone messes with my clichés. The blinding I accept. It is the effect of the marketplace on that esoteric readie business of making references – the pride of the fantasy world – that strikes me as truly awful.

I acknowledge that it can be difficult to know when to stop. If you are writing a science fiction novel that borrows from a historical period or real-life culture, should you explain this in an afterword, before some critic explains it for you, (and probably not quite as you'd have wished)? If you're writing technically distinctive dialogue (fascists, astronomers, palaeontologists...) is it permissible to go into the actual words of actual practitioners from actual texts? And if you do that, should you acknowledge their unwitting contribution? How much can you steal from a living colleague? And considering that fantasy about the future, at least, works in the same small window as any other market research, how can you avoid 'stealing' from the limited stock of ideas that are going the rounds?

Between the reader's right to know, and the writer's desire to add touches of verisimilitude to an otherwise drab and ill-seeming narrative (this quote is from a speech by a character, Koko in *The Mikado*, explaining why he and his mates told such whoopers about an execution that hadn't happened: W.S. Gilbert, librettist of a series of highly popular comic operas, British, nineteenth century, shall I go on?) You see what I mean. Well, between this and that,

you can quickly reach a point where the story vanishes in the cracks between the references. And indeed, to some writers, this is the ideal. Reference becomes the whole work, when appropriated fragments of other peoples' writing are pasted together for artistic rather than fictional effect. Appropriation (as long as you can avoid the lawsuits) is a technique that any artist can use. Used by a writer, especially a writer of fiction, it becomes a kind of negative style, a deliberate self-destruction; in which a story becomes valuable as an object alone, the words on the page valuable as objects, not for the meaning they're supposed to convey; and a work of science fiction can become just as much art as a pile of bricks or a model of a shark in a glass box

Love it or hate it, referencing on this sort of scale seems likely to remain an esoteric pursuit, and in no danger of blinding-out. But in the popular genres, feeding the readers' supposed need to know where a book is coming from becomes a dreary charade. It's a Hollywood effect. We love you, you're so different! But now we've bought you, you have to be different the same way every time. It's as if the industry had said to fantasy writers (In the broadest definition) we love this way you have of referring to other books-movies-myths-history. But we want to make it work better. Let's make it a rule that you have to choose your references from this list: that way nobody's going to feel left out of the game. Which brings me to the vexed question of pernicious recycling. When is reuse benign, and when is it just a waste of time and energy and a cause of further pollution? Does it really help the environment if you buy green recycled toilet paper? Or does the plant that rolls and bleaches and softens and dyes that recycled pulp only make things worse? When does retelling the

STEPHEN MARLEY: *Mortal Mask*

1993; Arrow/Legend, PB, £4.99, 403p

Strange events at a village 'on the shores of long ago China' have the monks of Ghost Bay worried. They send for Chia Black Dragon, an immortal woman-warrior who is living in retreat since she killed (or thinks she killed) her evil brother Nyak. Chia hates the evil inherent in her immortality and her superpowers. Nyak feels differently, and it becomes clear that a mad young guru is possessed by Nyak's undying spirit. There are silver masks that grow onto the wearers' faces, and faces that are stolen from the inside or from the outside. The moon comes into it. It's rather a pity that this rich mess doesn't get Stephen Marley appears to have been watching too many Hong Kong movies with Ninja Ghost in the title. For vast stretches we're led through long and winding takes of forest with weird noises, sudden unexplained whirling things, visceral explosions, where nothing intelligible happens. There seems to have been an earlier episode (when Chia killed Nyak the first time). A continuing series is threatened, but not for me. I'm sticking with *A Chinese Ghost Story*

JACK YEOVIL

Genevieve Undead

1993; Warhammer/Bantam, PB, £3.99, 257p

The title story in this loosely connected triple is longer and more coherent than the other two. It's a rehash of *Phantom of the Opera*, involving our old friends Genevieve Deudonne and Detlef Sierck, the actor-manager and his vampire girlfriend who first featured in the splendid *Drachenfels*. The obligatory slime and gore is rather humdrum (be there, done that); and there's some idiosyncratic false-moralising about the banality of evil (oh no, not the banality of evil!) But it has a cosy green-room bogey-tale ambience and the two main characters still make sense – better, they make a different sense than in *Drach*. All in all, quite enjoyable. The second story, 'Cold Star House', has something to do with the Mysteries Of Udolpho, and maybe *The Fall of The House of Usher*. And maybe a not-very-funny episode of *The Addams Family*. Genevieve's presence adds nothing to the story. At what point does sly quotation become pointless regurgitation? Quite soon now, I think. Not one of Jack's better contributions to the I-don't-remember-eating-that school of popular literature. The third story, 'Unicorn Ivory', is about hunting rituals and male bonding. Did you know that when you kill a male unicorn, it has an orgasm and the thing to do, absolutely de rigueur, is to gobble up the warm sperm? Well, you do now. This is less of a jumble than 'Cold Star House', and at least you pick up some interesting tips about Unicorn behaviour. But again Genevieve Deudonne is there for no very good reason. All in all, a rather tired performance from Jack Yeviol. With this book, you get a brief guide to the history of the Warhammer World; and a map



same old story become a waste of paper? Pretty soon now, I think.

Writers are like actors. No matter where our talents may happen to lie, we have a yearning to try out in the whole range of the classic roles. Everybody, secretly, guiltily as it may be, wants to do their own vampire story. (Okay, I don't. But I'm going to do my detective story one day). I bet you Umberto Eco would adore to give the world his vampire story, in fact he's probably working on it now. But as a reader of Freda Warrington's *A Taste of Blood Wine*, I'm left wondering, hungrily, what kind of book it would have made if Warrington had let the Hammer tableau element sink into the background? These eerie immortals, falling from their Crystal Ring into the human world. The human family torn apart by a monster in pursuit of another monster. What if *Blood Wine* had been recognisable as a vampire story only to Freda Warrington, who knows something at least (though not everything) about where her ideas come from; and to the odd 'readie' critic, who insisted on pointing out the subtle marks of Dracula? What a strange, wild, lyrical original fantasy that would have made: reaching further than the depths of Bram Stoker's imagination, into the depths where all the nightmares live, waiting to be reimagined. But no. It was not to be. A vampire story is a vampire story. And if you

blood-drenched immortal likes garlic, cultivates a suntan, and doesn't own a black tie, the reader has a right to demand an explanation.

I spend much of my time as a book reviewer grumbling to myself that editors don't seem to do anything anymore. But proactive editing, intended to protect the readers' rights, may be responsible for bringing the bureaucracy of the marketplace to bear on the hazy commonality of a writer's sources. Allusions of the kind that I was talking about with my friends the readie-librarians are safe enough. There doesn't have to be a quotation in words, or even a 'quotation' in the form of a lifted character or situation. It could be an atmosphere, an ambience that invokes the memory of another book. Often you don't know you're doing it: until a reader or a reviewer points out that your book is haunted by the shade of another story, loved and absorbed long ago. But the in-jokes people tend to use in adult fiction are much more vulnerable. The tongue-in-cheek, word to the wise cultural reference, which the editor doesn't understand, gets a scribble in the margin. Please explain: whereupon a busy writer like Jack Yeovil may be goaded into explaining a joke – a bad idea under any circumstances – and thereby changing a passage of fiction into a passage of non-fiction, of anti-fiction, that belongs in a database of popular culture if anywhere. My feeling is that if an editor asks you to identify your sources, you should take this as a sign that you haven't disposed of the evidence thoroughly enough. Remove the throwaway line, cancel the joke, bury the bodies more deeply. Preserve your right to use your experience of other fiction as secretly, pervasively, obscurely as you use the experiences of your life.

While literary fiction dabbles in the fantastic and experiments with science, it seems as if genre fiction readers are being compelled to become deconstructionists, reading anything but the story. Except that this is a strictly limited deconstruction, no layer upon endless layers of meaning involved, just that House Style tone card. Maybe it's more as if people are expected to read the fantasy as a roman à clef. It's not the story that matters, it's whether or not you're in the know and can recognise the famous characters depicted therein. As a critic, as a reader, I find that tone card frustrating. I don't want the paint on this vampire story to match the paint on the last one. I like variety, and it does not get in my way. I can still see what's going on in terms of the great edifice of literature. As a reader, I'm even more frustrated. No, actually, dear writers, I do not want to know where your ideas come from. Not while I'm reading the story. You can tell me in the pub later. When I am reading I want that information buried in decent obscurity: so that I can enjoy the yarn, however old and often retold, as innocently as a child.

Gwyneth Jones

NO CIGAR

John Clute



World War One had its points, for the fantasist. There were ghost spies; deserters who shapechanged into ghouls who lurked in underground redoubts in hellish nomans-

lands between the lines and who ate soldiers; flying submarines and land ironclads; the Finland Station and Stamboul; and a general sense of the huge intricacy of the fantasy edifice of the trench system. In the end, however, the fantasist who wished to use World War One had to fight against a sense that the conflict represented an intolerable thinning of the round world, where tales could be told of heroes against backdrops that breathed the soil. Ultimately, World War One is not storyable. Any theorist of Fantasy who paid attention to the conflict would tend (I think) to treat the 1914-1918 apocalypse as a Night Journey of the Western World which did not earn out, a vigil with only failures at the exam, and a dawn which opened on desertification of the water meadows. World War One, in the end, over and above the astonishingly savage deadly stupidity of the sclerosis of the Western Front, simply does not feed the imagination. It is a great stupor of the western mind, an endless exsanguinating dance macabre on the lavatory wall, as though God – to whom both sides prayed – had gotten its typewriter stuck.

It is hard, on the other hand, to go wrong with World War Two, because of its quickfire action, its militaria, its technological fixes, its dire and identifiable foe, its clarity of plot, its enclaves and sweeps and folderol. Assuming, of course, that one can gimmick the Final Solution out of the mind's eye. The best romances of World War Two – like Alistair MacLean's *Where Eagles Dare* (1966) – make no mention of pogroms. There is no extermination camp next door to the pub in 'Allo 'Allo, nor should there be. But it is not easy, in the end, to dodge the issue, for ever. And writers of entertainment who skate deliberately close to the edge – like

Richard Condon in *An Infinity of Mirrors* (1964) – find (as must be the case) that the real world of World War Two is a black hole; that there is no exit in romance, and that they are either writing a novel from the heart, or an obscenity. So the real world must be rigorously eschewed – as Harry Turtledove, author of *Worldwar: In the Balance* (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99), must certainly have realized before he ever touched finger to keyboard – and the abomination danced out of sight, if one is to take advantage of a conflict so full of the storyable.

Turtledove has come up with what could be an ideal answer, an alternate-history sf novel in which aliens invade Earth at a point during World War Two just before the extermination camps are properly operational, so that we are able to dodge the moral obscenity of cheering on tough Nazi veterans as they link up with Yanks and Brits and survivors of the Warsaw ghetto to fight off the reptiles from the stars.

The first pages of *Worldwar* bode ill, all the same. We are on board the battleship 127th Emperor Hetto of a fleet of alien spaceships about to invade Earth. We are introduced to lizard-like Fleetlord Atvar, a highly intelligent representative of his ancient, hidebound race. Reports reach him that the natives of 'Tosev 3' have developed technology at an unprecedented rate, and that, in the 800 years since the first lizard survey of the planet, they have evolved from primitive agriculturalists into sophisticated machine-age warriors. Atvar dismisses these reports, and we find ourselves – cheeks burning from memories of a time in early youth when storylines like this made us feel good about ourselves – in the world of John W. Campbell's *Astounding*, in Eric Frank Russell territory. That Turtledove must know this, and that in a sense this opening chapter must be seen as a recursive joke, only helps a little, because it is very difficult to pretend to be stupid enough to read an opening chapter like



this as though a story were being told, beyond the embarrassment of the memory of the time when wily quarrelsome mammal-sharp libertarian homo sap invariably outwitted any bureaucratic slow-witted hidebound cold-blooded hierarchy-ridden alien unfortunat enough to stumble into his path

Then it gets better. There are several narrative strands, neatly interwoven in the bestselling/technothriller fashion familiar to anyone who reads disaster tales. We begin just before the Lizards descend, and are introduced to various viewpoint characters: Two men involved in minor-league baseball in America, a nice mythopoeic touch, prepare themselves unknowingly for the conflict; a German tank commander does the same; as does a British Flight Lieutenant; and a Russian woman who pilots a primitive but highly effective U-2 biplane; as does a Chinese woman destined to be mated with various males by the invading Lizards in an attempt to understand human sexuality; as does another Brit, this time a radar operator, as does a leader of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto; as do various walk-ons, some of them historical figures in government or atomic research. It is all competent, suave, reportorial, discreet

The Lizards land. (The story continues to crosshatch viewpoints and experiences as though we, and the author, and God, were privy by nature to the ultimate quilt. This is fine, and it works, because we most sincerely wish it to.) At first the Lizards have no difficulty with primitive human weaponry, though they note with only slightly ruffled complacency that human fighters seem strangely inveterate. But soon the gumption of homo sap turns into a real threat, as the ingenious humans begin to suss the rigidity of the opposition, draw isolated Lizards into traps, invent the bazooka, etcetera. Much of mid-America is under alien domination, Berlin is A-bombed, Russia is devastated, etcetera. But the tidal advance of the enemy begins to mottle. By the end of volume one – the sequence looks like a tripleheader, unless Turtledove takes his vengeful humans into space and beards the Kzin-like Lizards in their own den, a part of the tale which could easily be sharecropped – the table is about to turn.

Without the Final Solution, anything goes. *Worldwar: In the Balance*, like any good World War Two story, is a tale told at solstice. The main exiles at the feast are the Japanese who – in strict accordance with 1990s American prejudices – get no viewpoint character. But for most of us, it is Carnival time. Let it continue

Beyond the Veil of Stars (Tor, \$21.95) is Robert Reed's sixth novel, and it is as ingenious, through-composed, clever and

sad as any of its predecessors. Like most of them, it is a rite-of-passage tale unpacked with an intricately and maturely thought-through pattern of events; like most of them, it must be said, its intelligence is greater than its burn. The problem with Reed, in other words, may simply be a failure of the crafting imagination to muscle in on the action.

The story this time round is quiet but full of landmines, which never quite explode. Young Cornell Novak, as the tale begins, travels around America with his eccentric father in search of UFO sightings. His mother – his

Transmuted into an alien format consisting of one central brain and seven physically-autonomous idiot ambulatory sections – one thinks of the aliens in Vernor Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep* (1992) – he gradually, as it were, sorts himself out. He learns the truth about his mother. He becomes reconciled to his father. He falls in love with a co-alien (there are a couple of surprises here).

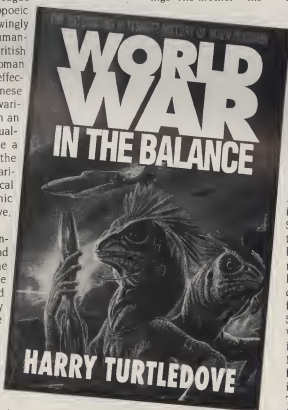
And the book ends, with a sense that full velocity was never quite achieved, that the burn didn't take. But this sense of mild let-down rests within a framework of resolutions perceived with admiration. The impersonality of that sentence is deliberate; for perhaps the strangest thing about *Beyond the Veil of Stars* is a sense that, just as one thinks of the book as having been written (for one does not think of Robert Reed as actually writing it), so one thinks of the book as having just been read (because I cannot quite remember my self as intersecting with the pages). It may, however, in later times, like a landmine that finally blows, shape the inside of the skull.

It is to wait and see.

As befits a fantasy writer, Midori Snyder, in *The Flight of Michael McBride* (Tor, \$21.95), also inscribes a rite-of-passage tale upon her landscape and the Irish backstory she invokes to motor the eponymous lad into self-discovery. Turns out he's a halfling, half the mortal son of a chess-playing dad who wins his fairy bride from one of the deathside peers of the Sidhe, and half the fairy son of that bride. Who dies as the book opens, flinching at iron, unable to cope with New York. Young McBride experiences a few trompe l'oeil horrors as bad fairies activate themselves in the normal world, and lights out for the Territory. Is guided to Texas by a kind female gambler. Goes on a Red River Valley cattle drive. Becomes a crow for a bit. Finds a hedge-witch lass, who succours him, and is then abducted. Wins her back (by a trick) from the bad Sidhe. Becomes a man.

It is all really very readable, and doesn't make too heavy weather of its research into the Old West. Main trouble is an excessive amiability of style, an incapacity to convey much of the powerful grimness the tale aspires to, which a more serious synopsis would point out. There are, for instance, several mildly-told gruesome deaths; and McBride's metamorphosed incarceration as a crow requires from Snyder, if it is to be properly conveyed, some of the hieroglyphic harshness of (say) Paul Hazel in *Undersaw* (1982), a book which does attempt to stare back at the cruel knots and savageries at the heart of the Celtic myths. There is, in the end, something portly and bumblebee about *The Flight of Michael McBride*. Pure genre stuff, without a bump. A good chat, but no rite.

John Clute



father's wife – has long ago abandoned them, though both of them have confabulated this human act into an abduction by aliens. But in his heart, Cornell knows he has been left. He is an exile in the heart of the heart of the country, and he will not come to terms with his self and his solitude – Reed's working out of the terms he must answer is accomplished in a most satisfactory fashion – until he can find, and fall in love with, and later abide, a fellow alien.

Meanwhile the sky disappears, becomes a topological mirror, reveals to scientists, gradually, that the universe may be stacked high with complex geometries containing trillions of species; at the same time, the government discovers a form of matter-transmission through this barrier which simultaneously transmits individuals into other worlds, and while doing so translates them physiologically into forms that befit the worlds they enter. Cornell becomes one of the cadre whom the government uses for exploration purposes.



THE WRONG TREE

Brian Stableford

Nearly 50 years have passed since Groff Conklin's *The Best of Science Fiction* (1946) provided genre sf with its first representative anthology. Much has changed in the interim as sf has expanded out of its pulp ghetto to become a book-based genre rubbing shoulders with fantasy, horror, techno-thrillers and "magic realism." Its motifs have been plundered by these neighbouring genres to the extent that purists have been forced to designate a special category of "hard science fiction" to distinguish the sf which aims for some kind of extrapolative rigour from that which simply uses the imagery of sf as window-dressing. The recent 864-page *Norton Book of Science Fiction* edited by Ursula Le Guin and Brian Attebery offered a representative collection of North American sf from 1960-90 which was conspicuously short on the harder kinds of sf, favouring dilute forms of literary fantasy which play with speculative ideas in deft and delicate fashion; now, ostensibly by way of compensation, David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer offer as a 1004-page rival *The Ascent of Wonder: The Evolution of Hard Science Fiction* (Tor, \$35.00).

Like Conklin's *Best of SF*, *The Ascent of Wonder* has two sententious introductions, and it is similarly careful to extrapolate the tradition it wishes to define backwards in time to take in such significant precursors as Poe and Wells. Only two stories are common to both anthologies, Hartwell and Cramer being content to take a few scattered samples from the pulps while reprinting the bulk of their material from the same period as the Norton anthology (with which it also has two stories in common), but there is a definite continuity of enterprise. Unfortunately, the manifesto for hard sf laid down by Gregory Benford in *The Ascent of Wonder* – which makes much of "playing the game" with the net of scientific fact and strung as tight as the story allows" is no

better borne out by the contents of the book than the manifesto provided for Conklin by John W. Campbell Jr himself. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" is here presented as an important proto-hard sf story, while J. G. Ballard, Gene Wolfe and John M. Ford all become hard sf writers of such significance that they warrant double inclusion (unlike the singly-represented Hal Clement, Larry Niven and Poul Anderson or the unrepresented Charles Sheffield). Anne McCaffrey's "Weyr Search" is included on the grounds that "intentions count" – in frank defiance of the philosophy of science which opines that what really counts is how things check out – while Katherine MacLean's "The Snowball Effect" is included on the grounds that it allegedly treats sociology "as if it were a hard science. The mere passing mention of mathematical or philosophical notions is sufficient, in these editors' eyes, to qualify a story as hard sf, so we find Richard Grant's "Drode's Equations" and Alfred Bester's "The Pi Man" here alongside Ian Watson's "The Very Slow Time Machine" and Ford's "Chromatic Aberrations." Look at the expense of science, or even at the expense of sf, also qualify, so we also find Philip K. Dick's "The Indefatigable Frog" and Arthur C. Clarke's "The Longest Science Fiction Story Ever Written" (whose text has not been corrected – in this proof copy, at least – even though Arthur Clarke is now well aware of the fact that it was Morley Roberts and not H. G. Wells who wrote "The Antipator").

It is, of course, true that the notion of hard sf is problematic and constitutes at best a "fuzzy set" with many marginal cases. Even writers who are interested in the careful extrapolation of specific scientific premises tend to use facilitating devices like faster-than-light starships, dimensional gateways and time machines to transport their characters to the appropriate fictional spaces. *Astounding/Analog*, the magazine which supposedly set the standard for "real" science fiction, was prepared to admit all manner of fantastic follies into its pages even before John Campbell became suffi-

ciently indiscriminating to play host to L. Ron Hubbard's Dianetics and the *psi*-boom of the 1950s. There is, however, a world of difference between admitting a few problematic stories to test the limits of a definition and filling half a book with stories which manifestly violate the logical limitations and typical attributes of hard sf on the grounds that they are somehow "engaged in a dialog" with it.

The simple truth is that intentions *don't* count; the fact that a man sincerely believes in fairies (or magic, or Jungian archetypes, or flying saucers, or flying dragons, or the God of his choice, or Evil Incarnate, or the power of chain letters to make fortunes) cannot be adequate grounds for elevating his fairy stories to the status of realistic fiction. It is precisely because it is so very easy for writers to introduce arbitrary miracles into their fiction that works which refuse such facile options are worthy of particular attention. The kinds of soft-centred sf which merely replay fairy tales in futuristic guise have always been more popular than the kinds of sf which aspire to some measure of intellectual rigour, and perhaps always will be, but it does no service to the cause of intellectual rigour to pretend that a glossy surface provides adequate cover for a hollow core. Lovers of hard sf are likely to feel that this anthology does grave disservice to their cause; readers who feel that any kind of fidelity to science or reason is a disposable irrelevance (and there are many who believe this of life as well as their favourite fictions) will find little to dent their confidence here.

Hartwell and Cramer are two of the editors of *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, which has played host since its inception some 70-odd issues ago to a long-running debate on the nature and merits of hard sf, this anthology might well bring that debate to an inglorious end. As of now the term "hard sf" seems to be as stubbornly devoid of any coherent meaning as the term "science fiction" – not so much an ascent of wonder as a case of barking up the wrong tree.

Brian Stableford

COMING NEXT MONTH

The new-look *Interzone* returns to its normal editorial hands, and they bring you new science-fiction stories by John Meaney, Ben Jeapes and others, plus an outstandingly *different* fantasy from rising Australian author Sean McMullen: "A Ring of Green Fire." And all our usual interviews, non-fiction features and reviews. So don't miss the November *Interzone*, on sale in October.

BOOKS RECEIVED

JULY 1994

The following is a list of all *sf*, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in *italics* following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

ALDIS BRYAN

Remembrance Day

Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-654679-5, 26pp, B-format paperback, cover by Gary Embury, £5.99 (Non-sf novel by a major author, first published in 1993) 18th August 1994.

Somewhere East of Life

Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0074-2, 392pp, hardcover, \$22.95 (sf novel, first published in the UK, 1994, the fourth volume in the "Square" Quartet, of which the previous titles were the non-sf novels *Life in the West*, *Forgotten Life* and *Remembered Day*, this American edition drops the British sub-title, "Another European Fantasia" (which, incidentally, would seem to tie the book in with Aldiss's *Barfist* in *The World*, 1969) 15th August 1994.

ANTHONY PIERS

Shame of Man: Goodysay, Volume 2. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85811-6, 380pp, hardcover, \$23.95, (Prehistoric sf novel, first edition, proof copy received, a follow-up to *Isle of Manowar* – it would be inaccurate to call the second book a sequel to the first since it actually begins its very episodic narrative some millions of years earlier and then does a "retake" on the span of human history which was covered in volume one, there are hundreds of prehistoric romances being published these days, but Anthony is actually attempting something more ambitious (if damnably difficult) in these books, and he deserves credit for it) 1 October 1994.

ASIMOV, ISAAC

The Complete Stories, Volume One

HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-647647-3, 410pp, A-format paperback, £5.99 (SF collection, first published in the USA, 1990, it purports to be the first part of some kind of definitive collection, but this is simply a straight repackaging of two old Asimov volumes, *Earth is Room Enough* and *Nine Tomorrows* (although the publishers don't tell us this), all the stories date from the 1950s, and there are no examples of the author's earlier or later work here) 25th July 1994.

BANTAM, SIMONE

The Foundation. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40488-1, 477pp, A-format paperback, £4.99 (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1993, reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 73) 8th September 1994.

BARNES, JOHN

Mother of Storms

Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-190-1, 455pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99 (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1994, there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition (not seen); reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 86) 28th July 1994.

BRITTE, POPPY Z

Drawing Blood

Penguin, ISBN 0-14-023871-9, 373pp, B-format paperback, £5.99 (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1993, proof copy received) 16th October 1994.

BROWN, ERIC

Engineman

Pan, ISBN 0-330-33043-8, 373pp, A-format paperback, £4.99 (SF novel, first edition, Brown's second novel, following *Melancholy Days*) 12th August 1994.

BURNELL, MARK

Freak

Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-61762-4, 306pp, hardcover, cover by John Avon, £15.99 (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received, debut book by a new British author born 1964) 3rd November 1994.

CARMODY, ISOBELLE

Oberevny: The Oberevny Chronicles, Book One Point SF, ISBN 0-590-55494-8, 321pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Scott, £2.99 (Young-adult sf novel, first published in Australia, 1987, this was a debut novel by an Australian author born 1958, who has since written at least three more; Point SF is a new imprint of Scholastic Publications Ltd, 17-19 Pratt St., London NW1 0AF, this is the first of their books we have seen, although it appears they have already issued some fantasy and horror titles, their books are surprisingly chunky for the low cover price, and among the goodies they have lined for this autumn are Molly Brown's debut novel, *Viras*, and a first of *sof*, *Soul Snatchers*, by interviewee extraordinary Stan Nicholls.) *Lead entry* 16th June publication, received in July 1994.

CHERRY, C. J.

Faery in Shadow

Legend, ISBN 0-90-925081-0, 249pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bruce Pennington, £4.99 (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993) 18th August 1994.

Foreigner

"A novel of first contact." Legend, ISBN 0-90-944391-0, 378pp, C-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £5.99 (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1994) 18th August 1994.

DELANEY, SAMUEL R.

The Mad Man

Richard Kossel (distributed in the UK by Turnaround Distribution, 27 Horsell Rd., London N5 1XL) ISBN 1-56333-193-4, xiv+501pp, hardcover, \$23.95 (£19.95 UK) (Non-sf novel by a major writer, first edition, there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £10.99 UK (not seen), this is the US edition of May 1994, now available in Britain, it seems to be very much a novel about sex and is being aimed at the gay market) 16th June 1994.

DICK, PHILIP K.

Gather Yourselves Together

Alfred A. Knopf/Brown WKS Books (Box 968, Herndon, VA 22070, USA) ISBN 1-87891-405-7, 291pp, hardcover, \$40 (Non-sf novel by a major author, first edition, this is said to be the first novel the late PKD ever wrote, circa 1951, and it's also said to be the last of his unpublished works of fiction which will appear in *Unseen Voices from the Street*, a "much cruder novel" according to Dwight Brown, ever sees the light of day, available in Britain at £36 postpaid from The Unlimited Dream Company, 127 Gaisford St., London NW5 2EG) Late entry, June publication, received in July 1994.

DONALDSON, STEPHEN

The Gap Into Madness: Chaos and Order.

HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-223804-6, 663pp, hardcover, cover by David O'Connor, £15.99 (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1994, fourth in the "Gap" series) 1st August 1994.

EASTERMAN, DANIEL

The Judas Testament

HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-246-1705-3, 444pp, hardcover, £14.99 (Near-future thriller, first edition, it's about the threat to Christianity posed by the discovery of unknown scrolls; it sounds reminiscent of a very old marginally sf melodrama, *When It Was Dark* by Guy Thomas (1903), "Daniel Easterman" is a pseudonym of Denis MacInnis who also writes accomplished ghost stories as "Jonathan Aycliffe") 12th August 1994.

EDDINGS, DAVID

Forever Solving: The Tamuli, Book Two

HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-236131-3, 608pp, A-format paperback, £5.99 (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993) 25th July 1994.

GIDEON, JOHN

Red Ball

Headline, ISBN 0-7477-0964-2, 314pp, hardcover, £16.99 (Horror novel, first published in the USA) 7/1994, "John Gideon" is a pseudonym for Lonn Hoklin) 11th August 1994.

GOONAN, KATHLEEN ANN

Queen City Jazz

Rox, ISBN 0-312-85678-4, 410pp, hardcover, \$23.95 (SF novel, first edition, proof copy received, a debut novel by an American (Florida resident) writer who has published stories in *Asimov* and *Interzone*) November 1994.

GORMAN, ED

Blood Red Moon

Headline, ISBN 0-7477-1124-8, 275pp, hardcover, cover by Les Gibbons, £16.99 (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1994, it's good to see Gorman being published in this country at last by a major publishing house) 11th August 1994.

HARMAN, ANDREW

The Tome Tunnel

Legend, ISBN 0-90-928491-X, 278pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £4.99 (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition, the author's third book in the space of about a year, a fourth, *101 Damnations*, is promised for January 1995) 18th August 1994.

JEFFERIES, MIKE

Stone Angels

HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21527-1, 301pp, A-format paperback, £4.99 (Fantasy novel, first published in 1993, reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 80) 25th July 1994.

JONES, GWYNETH

Flowerland

Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4448-0, 312pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £4.99 (sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1993, a sort-of-sequel to the author's first adult novel, *Divine Endurance*, reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 83) 14th July 1994.

KILWORTH, GARRY D.

Angel

Gollancz/VGSE, ISBN 0-575-05721-1, 286pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Mennin, £4.99 (Horror novel, first published in 1993; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 77) 28th July 1994.

KING, STEPHEN

Insomnia

Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-60845-5, 650pp, hardcover, £15.99 (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994, proof copy received) 6th October 1994.

KIRBY, D. S.

Oberon

Minerva Press [2] Old Brompton Rd., London SW7 3DQ, ISBN 1-85563-103-3, 110pp, small-price paperback, 30p (SF novel, first edition, presumably a debut book by a British writer, the author's name is given as Darren Steven Kirby on the spine, but it says D. S. Kirby on the title page.) *No date shown, received in July 1994.*

KOONTZ, DEAN

Mr Murder

Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4232-3, 367pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £5.99 (Horror novel, first published in the USA) 7/1993) 18th August 1994.

KRESS, NANCY

Beggars & Choosers

Tor, ISBN 0-312-85749-7, 316pp, hardcover, \$22.95 (SF novel, first edition, proof copy received, it's a sequel to her well-received *Begans* in Spain (1993), which we were never sent for review because it wasn't published for Tor) October 1994.

LITTLE, BENTLEY

The Mailman

Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4194-5, 440pp, A-format paperback, cover by Simon Dewey, £5.99 (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1991; reviewed by Pete Crowther in *Interzone* 84) 18th August 1994.

LUMLEY, BRIAN

Bloodwars

Rox, ISBN 0-312-85679-2, 509pp, hardcover, \$23.95 (Horror novel, first edition [?], proof copy received, it's described as "The terrifying conclusion to the Vampire World trilogy that began with *Blood Brothers* and continued in *The Last Rite*") October 1994.

DAGAN'S Bell and Other Discords

New English Library, ISBN 0-440-61836-1, 333pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £4.99 (Horror collection, first edition, reviewer edit Nick Austin goes to work, author Lumley seems to follow him – HarperCollins/Grafton, Headline, Penguin/Roc and now Hodder/NEL) 4th August 1994.

MCCAFFREY, ANNE, AND

ELIZABETH ANN SCARBOROUGH

Powers That Be.

Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14098-8, 351pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Elson, £4.99 (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1993, this planetary romance appears to be a genuine collaboration rather than a sharecrop. It's not set in one of McCaffrey's previous "worlds", and the authors' names are given in equal-size print on the cover (one has to learn to read such runes these days) 18th August 1994.

MCDONALD, IAN

Terminal Cafe

Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37416-8, 279pp, trade paperback, \$12.95 (SF novel, first published in the UK as *Necropolis*, 1994, proof copy received) 17th October 1994.

MCHUGH, MAUREEN F.

Half the Day is Night.

Rox, ISBN 0-312-85479-X, 352pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Lehr, £21.95 (SF novel, first edition, proof copy received, a second by the "most talked-about new sf author of the 1990s", still to be published in Britain, so she's not much talked about over here as yet, although Ken Brown did review her first novel, the Tiptree award-winning *Clara* *Mountain Zhang*, fairly glowingly in *Interzone* 64.) October 1994.

MCMULLEN, SEAN

Voices in the Light: Book One of Createrwinter. Abellion, ISBN 1-875346-10-4, B-format paperback, cover by Grant Gittus, AS12.95 (SF novel, first edition, a debut novel by the Australian author of the sf collection *Call to the Edge* which was reviewed here by John Clute [issue 66], it's available in Britain via the Unlimited Dream Company see our Small Ads.) *No date shown, received in July 1994.*

MASTERTON, GRAHAM

Flesh and Blood

Heinemann, ISBN 0-434-00014-0, 488pp, hardcover, £15.99 (sf/horror novel, first published in the USA) 7/1994) July 1994.



The Sleepless Mandarin

ISBN 0-7499-1576-8, 474pp. A-format paperback, \$4.99 (Horror novel, first published in the USA?) 1993)
25th July 1994

MOSESITT, L. E. JR.

Of Tangle Ghosts

Tor, ISBN 0-312-85700-9, 381pp, hardcover, \$22.95 (Alternative-world sf novel, first edition, proof copy received, it's set in a timeline where the United States never quite succeeded in coming together and North America is still colonized by European powers) October 1994

MORWOOD, PETER

Widowmaker: Clan Wars, Book Two

Legend, ISBN 0-09-91241-7, 236pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, \$5.99 (Fantasy novel, first edition sequel to *Crusade: Clan Wars, Book One* — which we never heard of and which the publishers seem to have omitted to send us in the past) 7th July 1994

PALMER, JESSICA

Random Factor

Point SF, ISBN 0-590-55665-7, 341pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, \$2.99 (Young-adult sf novel, first edition; the American-born, British-resident author has previously written horror fiction [and has a story in this very issue of *Interzone*], see comments about the new Point SF imprint in the entry for *Isobelle Cameron's The Last Dangerous Victims*)
Late entry (16th June publication, received in July 1994)

PRATCHETT, TERRY, AND STEPHEN BRIGGS

The Discworld Companion

Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05764-5, 288pp, hardcover, cover by John Kirby, £14.99 (Humorous reference guide to the characters, places and things in Pratchett's fantasy novels, first edition) 18th August 1994

PRIEST, CHRISTOPHER

The Book on the Edge of Forever: An Enquiry into the Non-Appearance of Harlan Ellison's The Last Dangerous Victims

Fantaparcus [7563 Lake City Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115, USA], no ISBN, 56pp, small-press paperback, cover by Drew Friedman, \$6.95 (Polemical essay on Ellison's never-published sf anthology, originally published in the UK in fanzine form in the late *Deadloss* Visions, 1987, this edition is updated and has been nicely produced for a wider American market, it's fun to read but also quite painful — and not-unimportant part of sf history, needless to say Mr Ellison has tried to suppress it, apparently without success so far. Late entry (July publication, received in July 1994)

REICHTER, MICKEY ZUCKER

The Last of the Renshals

Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-152-9, 533pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £4.99 (Fantasy novel, first

published in the USA, 1992, reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 76) 4th August 1994

ROBERTS, ANN VICTORIA

Dagger Lane

Chatto & Windus, ISBN 0-7011-4009-7, 504pp, £14.99 (Horror?) novel, first edition, it's described as "a contemporary ghost story and love story, the novel of a haunted marriage", it's the British [Yorkshire] author's third novel, her previous titles being *Louisa Elliott* (1989) and *Lane's Story* (1991) — presumably neither had fantastic content) 18th August 1994

ROBINSON, NIGEL

First Contact

Point SF, ISBN 0-590-55493-X, 314pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steinar Lund, £2.99 (Young-adult sf novel, first edition, the British author has previously written *Doctor Who* spinoffs)

Late entry (16th June publication, received in July 1994)

SAUL, JOHN

Guardian

Bantam, ISBN 0-553-07466-5, 381pp, A-format paperback, £4.99 (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1993) 18th August 1994

The Homing

Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03583-6, 389pp, hardcover, cover by Danilo Dack, £14.99 (Horror novel, first published in the USA?) 1994, 18th August 1994

SHAW, BOB

Dimensions

Gollancz/GFSE, ISBN 0-575-05719-X, 217pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Rogers, £4.99 (Humorous sf novel, first published as *Warren Peace* in 1993, reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 79) 28th July 1994

SMITH, WAYNE

Thor

New English Library, ISBN 0-450-61747-5, 242pp, A-format paperback, £4.99 (Horror novel first published in the USA, 1992, a debut novel by a new American writer, it's a variation on the werewolf theme) 4th August 1994

SNYDER, MADORI

The Flight of Michael McBride

Tor, ISBN 0-312-85540-2, 320pp, hardcover, \$21.95 (Fantasy novel, first edition, proof copy received, reviewed by John Clute in this issue of *Interzone*) November 1994

WARRINGTON, FREDA

A Dance in Blood Velvet

Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-62818-7, 471pp, hardcover, £15.99 (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition, suddenly our Freda, who has been writing fantasy for years, is being repackaged as a hot new Anne Rice lookalike) 12th August 1994

KURTZ, KATHERINE, AND SCOTT MACMILLAN Knights of the Blood

Raven, ISBN 1-85347-341-5, 350pp, A-format paperback, cover by Angus McKie, £4.99 (Horror/fantasy shatearop novel, first published in the USA, 1993, it states 'Katherine Kurtz presents' — on the title page but the cover and flyleaf copy don't actually make the claim that she has written or conceived any of it, so perhaps this is not really a shatearop novel after all, however, the author, Macmillan, happens to be Kurtz's husband, and the book is copyright 'Bill Fawcett & Katherine Kurtz', it appears to be Macmillan's debut novel and it's also the first release of a new British mass-market paperback imprint, Raven, published by Robinson Ltd) 15th August 1994

MCCONNELL, ASHLEY

Quantum Leap: Prelude, 'Sam's First Leap — the Untold Story'

Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0929-9, 247pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Birdsong, £3.99 (SF television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1994) 11th August 1994

MCCKILLIP, PATRICIA A.

Something Rich and Strange Brian Ford's *Paradise Lost* Introduction and Illustrations by Brian Ford Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-09674-5, xvii+206pp, hardcover, \$19.95 (Shared-world fantasy novel, first edition, reviewed by Simon & Schuster, inspired by Ford's artwork, and packaged by Byron Preiss Visual Publications, it's the second of a series written by various hands) 17th October 1994

OKUDA, MICHAEL, DENISE OKUDA AND DEBBIE MIREK

The Star Trek Encyclopedia: A Reference Guide to the Future

Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-71834-7, xv+396pp, very large-format paperback, £12.99 (Reference book for the sf TV series, first published in the USA, 1994, it's an illustrated A-Z of characters, places, things, there have been such books before in the vast secondary literature surrounding *Star*

WEBBER, COLLIN

Merlin and The Last Trump

Gollancz/GFSE, ISBN 0-575-05718-1, 269pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ansile Macleod, £4.99 (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1993, reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 72) 14th July 1994

WELLS, ANGUS

Lords of the Sky

A fabulous dragon epic: Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-085-9, 583pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Posen, £16.99 (Fantasy novel, first edition, there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen], we listed the Bantam/Spectra proof copy as "first edition" last issue, but this UK edition seems to precede it by a month or more) 28th July 1994

WHITBOURN, JOHN

Popes and Phantoms

Gollancz/GFSE, ISBN 0-575-05763-7, 287pp, A-format paperback, £5.99 (Fantasy novel, first published in 1993, reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 79) 11th August 1994

WILLIAMS, TAD

Storm: To Green Angel Tower, Part II.

'Book 3 of Millennium, Sorrow and Thim' Legend, ISBN 0-09-931261-X, 815pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, \$5.99 (Fantasy novel, first published in 1993 [as part of the complete, one-volume hardcover], reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 78, 7th July 1994)

WOLFE, GENE

Calde of the Long Sun: The Third Volume of the Book of the Long Sun

Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-450-61004-4, 291pp, hardcover, £16.99 (SF novel, first edition, we listed the Tor proof copy as "first edition" last issue, but this UK edition seems to precede it by a month) 14th August 1994

Lake of the Long Sun: The Second Volume of the Book of the Long Sun

New English Library, ISBN 0-450-60699-2, 352pp, A-format paperback, £4.99 (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1994, reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 81) 4th August 1994

WREDE, PATRICIA C

The Raven Ring

Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-450-61004-4, 291pp, hardcover, £16.99 (SF novel, first edition, proof copy received, it's the long-awaited new novel in the *Lyra* series) November 1994

ZELL, STEVE

Ward

Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1424-2, 310pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99 (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994, the spelling of the title, as given above, is correct, it's a debut novel by a new American writer) 11th August 1994

'Trk, but this seems to be the biggest yet, with over 5,000 entries) 15th August 1994

O'NEIL, DENNIS

Batman: Knightfall

Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03840-1, 349pp, hardcover, £9.99 (Fantasy spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1994, adapted from various comic books published by DC, featuring the 35-year-old Batman here created by Bob Kane, there's an interesting afterword by the author in which he praises the virtues of the novel form and states "comic book series and novels are very different things. *Knightfall* the book is a second cousin to *Knightfall* the comics, and they're both clearly, but sometimes distantly, related to the radio program of the same name", note there's been a definite tendency in recent years for spinoff fiction of all kinds to become longer and more complex, and perhaps it needs to be said (more pretentious) 25th August 1994

PERRY, STEVE AND STEPHAN

Aliens vs. Predator: Prey

Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-227-4, 259pp, A-format paperback, cover by Nelson DeCastro, £4.99 (SF movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1994, it's actually based on a graphic novel by Randy Stradley and Chris Warner, which in turn was based on the Twentieth Century Fox films *Predator* and *Aliens*, and the designs for the first of the latter series by artist H. R. Giger, isn't it getting complicated? — we wonder when someone is going to write *R2D2 Meets E.T.* [a spoof title which first appeared in J. G. Ballard's *The Object of the Attack* in *Interzone* in 1984] 4th August 1994

RAWN, MELANIE

Knights of the Morningstar: "Quantum Leap"

Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0805-5, 215pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Birdsong, £2.99 (SF television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1994) 11th August 1994

SPINOFFERY

This is a list of all books received which fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and shatearops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, etc). The collective term "Spinoffery" has been chosen as a heading for the sake of brevity. These books are the modern equivalent of the pulp magazines or the dime novels of yore, the much of popular fiction, and, who knows, they may give birth to classics one day (just as the pulps delivered Raymond Chandler), nevertheless, we await with trepidation the time when this section of the "Books Received" goes to be longer than the main section, which it probably will...

ANDERSON, KEVIN I

Dark Apprentice: The Jedi Academy Trilogy,**Volume II: Star Wars**

Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40009-7, 354pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Alvin, £3.99 (SF movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1994) 18th August 1994

BISCHOFF, DAVID

Canoeide: Aliens

Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-225-8, 281pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Dorman, £4.99 (SF movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1993, based on a graphic novel by Mike Richardson and others, which in turn was based on the *Aliens* films and the designs of H. R. Giger, this appears to be the fourth 'Aliens' novel) 14th August 1994

HALDEMAN, JOE

Planet of Judgment: "Star Trek Adventures, 7"

Titan, ISBN 1-85286-531-X, xiv+151pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alister Pearson, £4.50 (SF television-and-film-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1977) 18th August 1994

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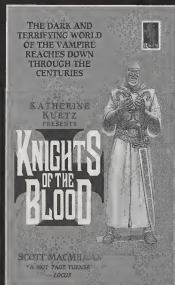
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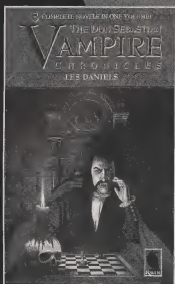
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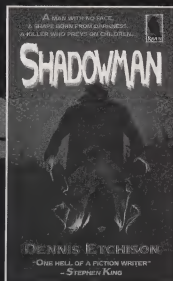
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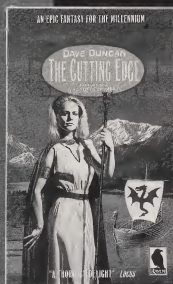
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